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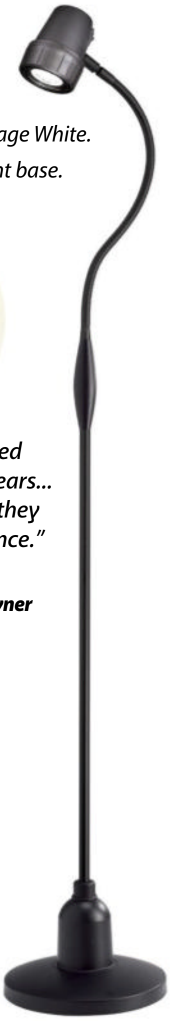

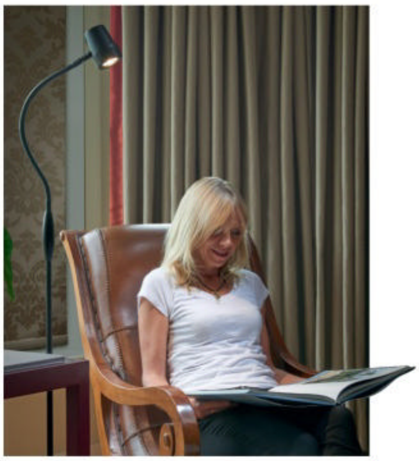

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THE SOUTH SHIELDS POLTERGEIST AT 20

December 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of one of the best attested cases of a poltergeist outbreak on record. It has been described as "one of the most violent outbreaks in British poltergeist history", and the events that occurred left all that witnessed them shocked, bewildered and traumatised. Twenty years on, **DARREN W RITSON** reflects on his investigation of the South Shields Poltergeist.

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BEN TIMBERLAKE explains how a soldier's hallucination in the Welsh woods led him to re-examine a theory that fungi might be behind our ghost stories, religious visions, and things that go bump in the night...

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46 FORTEAN TV: THE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

In 1997 and 1998, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which Rev Lionel Fanthorpe presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he concludes his series rewatch with a look at *Fortean TV's* last hurrah – the 1998 Christmas Special…

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

CHRISTMAS CRACKERS

Our cover story marks the 20th anniversary of the onset of one of Britain's most notable modern poltergeist cases. In December 2005, a family in South Shields, South Tyneside, began experiencing disconcerting events in their modest and, up until then, perfectly normal home. By the following year, fearing they were being haunted, they had reached out for help to their local church, a Spiritualist group and, finally, to paranormal investigator Darren W Ritson. Darren and his colleague Michael J Hallowell began an investigation that went on for many months and allowed them to witness the whole range of phenomena traditionally associated with poltergeist activity, from the relatively mundane – objects being moved, mysterious knockings – to the explicitly threatening – crude messages and physical attacks. Looking back, Darren feels the experience was both a blessing and a curse: the chance to observe such an outbreak at first-hand was a rare one, but the accusations of incompetence and even fraud that followed were a harrowing coda to the case that he still lives with today.

Jollier seasonal memories can be found in Ryan Shirlow's conclusion to his epic *Fortean TV* re-watch, as Father Lionel Fanthorpe (in full Santa mode) signs off in the series' legendary Christmas Special. Speaking of Santa, is he the same as Father Christmas? In our festive 'Mythconceptions', Mat Coward attempts to untangle the complicated genealogy of these personifications of the season. Alan Murdie, meanwhile, heads to Europe in search of Christmas ghost traditions, ex-Special Forces soldier and archæologist Ben Timberlake recounts a strange experience with a gnome, artist and writer Lally Macbeth celebrates the piskey-haunted folklore of Enys Tregarthen, and SD Tucker finds that Christmas favourite Super Mario is probably a Mason. Happy Christmas!

FT SPECIAL EDITIONS

While you're here, we'll make a shameless plug for our latest FT special edition – *Witches & Witchcraft: Stories of Sorcery, Spells and Superstition*. Bringing together long-out-of-print articles from the FT archive, this collection explores the history and folklore of witchcraft and comes with a thoughtful introduction and brand new commentary and analysis from bestselling author, historian of witchcraft and FT contributor Malcolm Gaskill. You can find a copy at your local newsagent or order direct from the FT shop – https://shop.forteantimes.com/products/books – where you will also find the full collection of FT special editions, any of which would make perfect fortean stocking fillers!

ERRATA

FT458:72: Tom Ruffles spotted an error in this issue's Strange Deaths section. "The death of Dmitry Ukhin is said to have taken place in 'the Kirishsky District, near Leningrad'. The city of Leningrad is now, of course, St Petersburg. The oblast containing the Kirishsky District is still called Leningrad, so the entry should have read either 'in the Leningrad Oblast' (or region) or 'near St Petersburg'."

FT459:61: Tom was also "puzzled to read in Malcolm Henderson's letter that the Kármán line starts 62 kilometres/100 miles above the Earth, as a kilometre is shorter than a mile. It's actually 100 km/62 miles." Tom, of course, is quite right.

ForteanTimes
NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS

COVER ILLUSTRATION
ETIENNE GILFILLAN

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Exclusive new features: Reimagining the Monster: Oscar-winner Dave Elsey recreates Phil Leakey's iconic make-up, with previously unheard audio interview from Leakey himself. A tribute to wardrobe mistress Molly Arbuthnot and her contribution to Hammer's success, with insights from Frankenstein actor Melvyn Hayes among others. Jimmy Sangster's horror output is celebrated by a group of creatives who knew the man and were inspired by his work. Jack Asher Speaks: A rare, previously unheard interview with the legendary cinematographer.

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BLOOD ORANGE

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

FOLKLORE FINDINGS

First results of the National Folklore Survey offer insights into contemporary beliefs

While the original National Folklore Survey from the 1960s was unscientific and open ended, simply asking random people "what do you know to be true?", its 21st century successor is a very different beast. Announced last October (**FT453:4-5**), the two-year project is a collaboration between Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Hertfordshire and Chapman University in the US. Led by regular FT contributor David Clarke and colleagues, it uses all the sociological and statistical tools available to modern polling and research to interrogate the folkloric beliefs of the English population. Investigations into the other UK nations depend on securing additional funding.

On 10 October, they announced their first results, just in time for Hallowe'en. The National Folklore Survey used the public polling apparatus of IPSOS UK, an extremely well established polling company, to question a panel of 1,730 people between the ages of 16 and 75, balanced by demographics such as age, education, gender, ethnicity, religion, region and income level, to give a representative picture of the English population. Clarke said, "We wanted to make it more multicultural, and we've got, I think, 15% ethnic minority interaction with it," which, given that about 18% of the UK population is from an ethnic minority, makes this far more representative then most surveys. They took a wide view of what constitutes "folklore" and explored three areas: belief in the paranormal/unexplained, supernatural experiences and beliefs and practices relating to Hallowe'en, and looked at how these varied across numerous parameters.

LEFT: Hallowe'en is celebrated all over the country, although with variations across regions and age groups. **FACING PAGE**: Nessie remains popular despite being dismissed by most cryptozoologists, while interest in UFOs remains widespread.

Paranormal beliefs were much more common in people under 45

BELIEFS

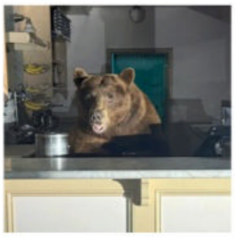
The survey took an inclusive view of what constitutes the paranormal and unexplained, encompassing beliefs in ghosts, magical beings, telekinesis, possession, spells, psychics, angels, demons, curses, UFOs, mystery big cats and much else that falls under the fortean umbrella. Here, they found that paranormal beliefs were much more common in people aged under 45, with those aged 25 to 34 being most likely to say they believed in at least some elements of the paranormal. The survey looked in a bit more depth at UFO beliefs and found that while 32% of those surveyed think all UFO sightings are hoaxes or misperceptions of ordinary phenomena, the rest of the population have a quite diverse set of opinions about them. Almost 25% of respondents say they believe that at least some UFOs are spaceships controlled by non-human intelligences, while 23% say they believe some UFOs are visitors from another dimension or are time travellers. In addition, 24% say they believe alien spacecraft have crashed on Earth and 13% believe they have permanent bases here. Extrapolated to the whole population of England, these figures represent a significant number of people – for example, the 27% who say they believe the existence of aliens has been covered up by governments comes to 11 million individuals nationwide, although this is lower than the 31% who said they believed in this in a less systematic survey done for the *Times* in 2007. Despite having rather fallen out of favour among hardcore ufologists, the idea of Ancient Astronauts is still popular among the general public; 28% think aliens visited Earth in prehistory, and 15% think they were involved in building our ancient monuments such as Stonehenge. Ten per cent of those surveyed said they had seen a UFO, which contrasts with the 23% of Americans and 21% of Canadians who reported seeing UFOs in similar surveys. Only 15% of respondents were aware of places in England associated with UFO stories, such as Rendlesham, compared to the 62% who have heard ghost stories and legends from the area where they live.

It is notable that other phenomena now considered a busted flush still have popular currency in the general population; 19% still think crop circles are made by non-human forces or energies, despite it having long been clear that they are almost certainly all made by humans, and the Loch Ness Monster still refuses to die, despite lacking credibility for at least 30 years: 17% of England still believes in it, although many more respondents, 34%, believed in the more credible Alien Big Cats. Ley Lines remain popular, with almost a third of respondents, 31%, believing in them too.

EXPERIENCES

When it came to actually experiencing the supernatural, a surprisingly low number, 16%, said that they had had a ghostly or extraordinary experience, but of those, 18% had never told anyone else, not even close family or friends. Déjà vu was extremely common, having been experienced by 45% of respondents, while 21% believe they have had premonitions, and 7% say that they have experienced an Out-of-Body Experience. A

JUDGEMENT DAY DELAYED
Preparations for the Rapture are premature
PAGE 6



BEAR-FACED CHEEK
Ursine diner found in ice cream parlour
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STRANGE CONTINENT
A crop circle shortage, but sand art galore
PAGE 22

similar number reported Near Death Experiences, and despite claims that Britain is becoming less religious, 39% say they believe that there is life after death. Meanwhile, 36% say they believe in ghosts or spirits of deceased people exist, and 27% say they believe it is possible to communicate with the dead. Looking at people's reaction to ghosts, we seem to find them progressively less scary as we get older.

By far the most popular paranormal activity among the general public is, not surprisingly, reading horoscopes, which 28% have done, although only 4.3% have actually consulted astrologers. Other activities such as crystal healing, consulting psychics or fortune tellers hover around 8 to 11%, and 5% have taken part in some kind of paranormal group, with the largest number of these being in the 25 to 34 age group. For almost all of these activities, participants have been predominantly female.

Although the popular perception is that Hallowe'en has largely eclipsed Bonfire Night as England's premier autumn folk celebration, the survey found that this was not the case; 46% of respondents said they either always or sometimes celebrated Hallowe'en, compared to 52% who said they either always or sometimes celebrated Bonfire Night. However, the survey did not include under-16s; if they were included, Hallowe'en would probably have triumphed. When considering what people do at Hallowe'en, 30% of respondents said that they watch spooky films or TV, which is almost equal to those giving out treats (31.8%) and more popular than pumpkin carving, which is done by 26.4% of the population, although that is still a lot of pumpkins. There is no data on those obstinately sticking to carving turnips or swedes. Lots of people decorate their houses at Hallowe'en – 24% – and 22% celebrate by dressing up. 24.4% of all respondents eat or provide Hallowe'en related foods, but these are mostly people under 45. In fact, there is a significant cut off in Hallowe'en activities at age 45, with far fewer people above that age getting involved, perhaps because it hasn't been so much a part of their culture growing up, and by that age their children are mostly doing independent Hallowe'en activities. It also turns out that Hallowe'en involvement varies massively across the country, with the East Midlands seeming to come out bottom on all measures. Interestingly, using a Ouija board or having a séance at Hallowe'en is hugely more popular in London than anywhere else. When asked whether they had heard stories about pins, needles and razor blades being found in Hallowe'en treats, 29% of people surveyed said they had heard of this legend, but only 11% of respondents believed this had actually happened, while folklorist Joel Best says: "In my own research, I have been unable to find a substantiated report of a child being killed or seriously injured by a contaminated treat picked up in the course of trick-or-treating."

TRENDS

It is clear that taking a systematic approach to understanding English folklore has borne fruit, with some very interesting trends being revealed, and while there are some clear headline takeaways from the research, the full data gives a much deeper insight into British beliefs. The kind of paranormal things believed by the general public lags behind the positions of those with specialist interest, so the Loch Ness Monster is still taken relatively seriously, despite cryptozoologists dismissing its reality, and Ancient Astronauts still have a degree of credibility, although hardcore ufology moved on to other paradigms long ago. This perhaps reflects the influence of the TV channels that show 24/7 paranormal shows, many of which uncritically churn out the old favourites. That may also, in part, account for the skewing of paranormal beliefs towards the younger, mid-20s to mid-30s, audience, which contradicts perceptions that the audience for things fortean is an ageing one. Maybe less surprisingly, the survey shows that interest in the paranormal skews towards the female, as historically things like crystal healing and psychics have tended to appeal to a predominantly female audience. Another interesting result turns up when the breakdown of belief in various aspects of English folklore is looked at by religion. It is often taken for granted that interest in paranormal phenomena, such as UFOs, is predominantly a white, Western tendency, but the survey shows that Muslim respondents came out with the highest level of belief in almost all UFO-related phenomena, and, it turns out, are significant participants in Hallowe'en activities too, joining in far more than Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu respondents.

It will be fascinating to see what the second year of the survey reveals, and it is fervently hoped that the success of the first year enables funding to be obtained to extend and expand the research. *nationalfolkloresurvey.co.uk/news/first-findings-from-the-nfs.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

DOG BECAME SUSPICIOUS WHEN MAN WORE TWO PAIRS OF TROUSERS TO WORK

Daily Mirror, 2 Oct 2025.

Drivers warned to keep conkers in their cars or risk £2,500 fine

Daily Express, 11 Oct 2025.

DOORBELL PRANKSTER THAT TORMENTED RESIDENTS OF GERMAN APARTMENTS TURNS OUT TO BE A SLUG

Guardian, 8 Sept 2025.

Badgers blamed for nuns' exhumation

Hastings Independent, 27 Aug 2025

SIDELINES

JUST DON'T

A 50-year-old farmer from Uttar Pradesh, India, who was describes as "under the influence of intoxicants", ended up in hospital in a critical condition after trying to kiss a snake as a social media prank. Unsurprisingly, the snake responded by biting the man on the tongue. He had clearly not heeded the warning from a similar stunt that killed a man in Telangana in 2024. The farmer's film footage did successfully go viral, though. *Times, 17 Jun 2025.*

SNAPPY SNAP

While visiting the Kabug Island Mangrove and Wetlands Park in the Philippines, a 29-year-old man climbed over a chain-link fence to snap a selfie with what he thought was a plastic crocodile. The croc, though, was very real and took advantage of the situation by grabbing the incautious visitor by the arm and repeatedly dragging him underwater in a "death roll". A nearby keeper rushed to the rescue, hitting the croc with a lump of concrete until it let go and, amazingly, the man survived, although he needed more than 50 stitches in his badly mauled arm and leg. *people.com, 4 May 2025.*

CRETACEOUS FASHION

Luxury fashion brand VML have teamed up with The Organoid Company and Lab-Grown Leather Ltd to reverse-engineer traces of 66-million-year-old skin protein found in Tyrannosaurus rex fossils and recreate the DNA which codes for it. They then insert this into cells, enabling T. rex leather to be grown in the lab. The collaborators view this as a way to produce an eye-catching and ethical alternative to regular leather, and to artificial leathers made with plastics. While still in the experimental stages, in the future they intend to use T. rex leather to make handbags and shoes for sale to the public. *iflscience.com, 29 Apr 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

HOLY SHIT!

Judgement Day is delayed, Thai monks are mired in scandal and Palantir boss takes on the Antichrist

GAGE SKIDMORE

ABOVE LEFT: South African pastor Joshua Mhlakela sharing news of the supposedly imminent Rapture on YouTube. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Meanwhile, tech billionaire Peter Thiel was delivering secret lectures about the Antichrist.

STILL NOT HAPPENING

A flurry of excitement rippled through Christian social media in September when, during an interview with Innocent and Millicent Cent on the CENTTWINZ TV YouTube channel, South African pastor Joshua Mhlakela announced that he had received a vision telling him God was going to "rescue the Christians out of the world" on 23 and 24 September. This was also Rosh Hashanah, the Feast of Trumpets, the day marking the Jewish New Year, which in some versions of evangelical Christian eschatology also signifies the return of Christ and the Rapture, when God bodily transports all true Christians to Heaven, leaving the rest of us behind to experience seven years of "tribulation" before Judgement Day. Mhlakela went on to prophesy that this would "happen with such power that it would cause the Earth to shake". "The Rapture is upon us, whether you are ready or not," he said, explaining that, "I saw Jesus sitting on his throne, and I could hear him very loud and clear saying, 'I am coming soon'."

Inevitably, this resulted in reports of people quitting their jobs and selling their possessions in readiness for the rapture. Religious TikToker Tilahun Desalegn told his 25,500 followers that he had sold his five-year-old car because he was "catching a flight to Heaven", saying, "She's got to go. I won't need her beyond September. I'm going home to where my father in Heaven is." However, even he acknowledged an element of doubt, saying, "If on the 25 of September I'm still here, I will upload an apology video [for] everyone that I convinced there was going to be a Rapture and left them disappointed," and that he would "probably never talk about the Rapture again."

God had "delayed the Rapture until the Epstein files are released"

The dates came and went, with no discernible rapture taking place, and while some disappointed evangelicals took to posting tearful videos lamenting being left behind, others rationalised the situation, claiming that God had merely "delayed the Rapture until the Epstein files are released", leading to a further chorus of voices demanding their publication. *ladbible.com, 22 Sept; dailystar.co.uk, 24 Sept 2025.*

BILLIONAIRE VS ANTICHRIST

Right wing tech billionaire Peter Thiel, founder of the digital surveillance monolith Palantir, recently delivered a series of secret lectures on the Antichrist at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, requiring that attendees at the sold out events treat them as strictly off the record. Not altogether surprisingly, they leaked. Kshitij Kulkarni, from another tech company called Succinct, took notes and put them up on his personal blog, and although Thiel swiftly had them taken down, by then the media had taken up the story.

In the confused and contradictory lectures, Thiel claimed the Apocalypse is imminent unless technology innovators like himself are given more power and are freed from regulation by governments. Thiel's opinion is that Christianity sees history as relentlessly progressive and so the new is always better than the old, but he believes that scientific progress has "stagnated" because the world has become insufficiently Christian. He sees the Antichrist as "an evil king or tyrant or anti-messiah who appears in the end times" and who will work through a "one world government", which seizes power to oppose the "existential threat of AI" and completely closes down technological

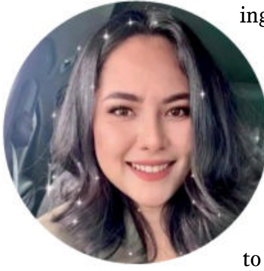
ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: 'Jet-set monk' Wirapol Sukphol is escorted to the prosecutor's office in Bangkok, Thailand in 2017. **BELOW**: Wilawan Emsawat, aka 'Ms Golf', is accused of blackmailing numerous senior monks with whom she was having sex.

progress. Thiel also feels that international financial bodies are hastening Armageddon, because "It's become quite difficult to hide one's money". He also points the finger at the International Criminal Court for prosecuting Filipino dictator Rodrigo Duterte and putting out warrants for others, such as Binyamin Netenyahu. Thiel didn't name the Antichrist, but said they would be a "luddite who wants to stop all science", naming Greta Thunberg, Eliezer Yudkowsky and Marc Andreessen as examples of the kind of person he has in mind, and believes the solution is to allow unfettered development of AI, with tech entrepreneurs like himself in charge.

Reflecting on Thiel's thoughts, theologian and technology ethicist Simon Cross says he is "drawing attention to things which are… rarely referenced in any way, shape or form in the Bible," while Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford, said the lectures were "what you'd expect a technology company to say… that they want to be free to explore without regulation and to innovate without regulation." US tech journalist Ryan Mac, who has followed Thiel's career closely, believes he is embarking on a "branding exercise" to set himself apart as he raises funding and seeks out new investments. Some commenters on social media took the view that with his development of monolithic surveillance technology, sold to governments worldwide, and his right wing political views, Thiel himself was a better candidate for the Antichrist than anyone he was targeting, and that the things he had been saying were exactly what you might expect from an Antichrist trying to distract attention from himself. *jasoncolavito.com, 26 Sept; theguardian.com, 10 Oct; observer.co.uk, 19 Oct 2025.*

MONK-EYING AROUND



Revered Buddhist institutions in Thailand have been rocked by scandal after Wilawan Emsawat, 35, given the pseudonym of "Ms Golf" by police, was revealed to have secretly photographed, filmed, then blackmailed at least nine senior monks with whom she had been having sex. Police believe she extorted at least 385 million baht (£8.8m) from the monks over a three year period and when they raided her house they found more than 80,000 compromising photos and videos of religious leaders. They discovered that the woman had been blackmailing monks when the abbot of a Bangkok monastery suddenly resigned after she tried to extort money from him, claiming she had given birth to his child and demanding seven million baht (£161k) for child support. Emsawat was found to have spent most of the money on gambling, and was charged with extortion, money laundering and receiving stolen goods.

This was just the latest in a series of scandals to hit Thai Buddhism. In 2017 senior monk Wirapol Sukphol was charged with sex offences, fraud and money laundering after suspicions were raised about his lavish lifestyle, and all four monks at a temple in Phetchabun were disrobed for drug offences in 2022. To counter this trend, Thai police have now opened a hotline for people to report "misbehaving monks".

Meanwhile, in Peru, Ciro Quispe López, 51, resigned as the bishop of Juli after he accidentally sent explicit pictures and videos of a tryst to his cleaner, who complained to the Catholic Church. Investigation revealed that López had as many as 17 lovers, and it also resulted in several finding out about each other and coming to blows, with the Times reporting that "a nun who was one of Quispe's lovers was jealous of a lawyer the bishop was also seeing and sent information about his affairs to a third lover who got into a fight with the lawyer". *D.Telegraph, BBC News, 16 Jul; metro.co.uk, 7 Oct 2025.*

SIDELINES

FINANCIAL CRASH

There was much excitement in Alvord, Texas, when news got out that an 18-wheeler truck carrying $800,000 had crashed on nearby Highway 287 and spilled money all over the road: the only problem was it was in dimes – eight million of them. In the end, the wreck was not swarmed with treasure seekers, but the road was closed while workers laboriously cleared up the coin spill. It is not entirely clear why the truck was packed with dimes, but Alvord Mayor Caleb Caviness said, "The funniest part to me was that they picked up the dimes using the vacuum trucks that are used to suck out sewage and water and stuff like that." *metro.co.uk, 1 May 2025.*

IT'S IMMATERIAL

Italian sculptor Salvatore Garau successfully sold his artwork "Io Sono", which translates as "I am", at auction for £13,300 despite it being completely invisible. Garau insists the work, described as an "immaterial" statue, exists as "air and spirit" in a five-by-five-foot (1.5m by 1.5m) space, defined for the owner in their certificate of ownership. "You don't see it, but it exists," he said, explaining, "The vacuum is nothing more than a space full of energy, and even if we empty it and there is nothing left, according to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, that 'nothing' has a weight, therefore, it has energy that is condensed and transformed into particles, that is, into us." *indy100.com, 12 May 2025.*

DEAD HAND LIVES

Throughout the Cold War the airwaves resonated to the sound of mysterious "number stations" broadcasting strange sounds, strings of numbers and musical phrases. Not all of them went quiet with the fall of the Soviet Union; the Soviet UVB-76 radio station, also known as Buzzer, Dead Hand Radio or Judgement Day Radio, has remained live. For years it has mostly broadcast a buzzing tone, but in May, just before President Putin had a phone call with Donald Trump about Ukraine, it broadcast "NZhTI 89905 BLEFOPUF 4097 5573", and after the call, "NZhTI 01263 BOLTANKA 4430 9529", before going back to the buzzing. The meaning and purpose of the messages remains unknown. *metro.co.uk, 20 May 2025.*

SIDELINES...

GOLF DOUBLE

On 25 January, amateur golfer Iain Robertson, 64, hit a hole in one on the 15th hole of the Garmouth and Kingston golf course in Moray, Scotland. The next day, and with the same ball, Robertson got another hole in one , this time on the 13th hole. "To get two in two days, it's never been heard of before," he said. "I bought a bottle of malt and put it behind the bar." *D.Mirror, 15 Feb 2025*

BARKING

Former royal family member Sarah Ferguson, who now looks after Queen Elizabeth II's corgis, Muick and Sandy, says that she firmly believes that the late Queen is communicating with her through the dogs' barks. "I have her dogs; I have her corgis. Every morning, they come in and go, 'woof woof' and all that and I'm sure it's her talking to me," she says. "I'm sure it's her, reminding me she's still around". *dailymail.co.uk, 16 May 2025.*

SCAM O'SHANTER

Thomas Robinson, 55, ended up in court charged with fraud after his company, The Wee Tea Plantation, was revealed to be fake. It had sold "Scottish grown" teas with names like Highland Green and Scottish Antlers Tea to exclusive hotels and prestige retailers like Fortnum and Mason, but Robinson had not grown the tea on a plantation in Perthshire as he claimed; he had bought a ton of it from India, repackaged it, and sold it at 100 times the purchase cost. He claimed it was possible for him to harvest tea that far north because he had invented a "special biodegradable polymer" to grow the bushes in, which seems to be identical to ordinary bin bags. *BBC News, 29 May 2025*.

MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL PLANET

Chimps and raccoons take to drink while pelicans plummet from the skies

JAKE BROOKER / CHIMFUNSHI WILDLIFE ORPHANAGE TRUST

ABOVE: Sticking bits of grass in your ear – or even up your bum – is the latest trend for chimps in Zambia.

APE STYLE

Keepers at the Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage in Zambia have noticed a fashion trend spreading among groups of chimpanzees living there – sticking strands of grass in their ears or rectums, and just leaving them to hang there for a while. Researchers cannot find any physical or medical purpose for the behaviour, but it has spread from chimp to chimp so that most of the animals in the sanctuary have been doing it. The grass-in-ear behaviour was first seen in a female chimp named Julie in 2010. She died in 2013, but by then the behaviour had started spreading through the group, with most animals participating by 2014. By 2024, the trend had largely fallen out of fashion in this first group, with only two of Julie's sons continuing to wear grass. In 2023, though, a second group also took to wearing grass in their ears, despite having no contact with the original grass-wearers. This group has gone on to take it further; a male named Juma started inserting grass into his rectum, and this trend spread to the rest of his group within a week, resulting in most of them wandering about with grass hanging out of their backsides. It is thought that both groups could have picked up the behaviour from the sanctuary's keepers, because although they have no direct contact, they do share keepers, and, study leader Edwin van Leeuwen says, "These caretakers reported that they sometimes put a blade of grass or a matchstick in their own ears to clean them. " Van Leeuwen, assistant professor of animal behaviour and cognition at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, said it was likely that this behaviour was a social fad, like Orcas wearing salmon hats (**FT455:6-7**), as social animals often copy each other's behaviour. He also feels that captivity has played a role, as captive animals have fewer challenges than those in the wild, so have more time to engage in frivolous behaviour. *livescience.com, 8 Jul 2025.*

> *A male named Juma started inserting grass into his rectum*

LAGER, LAGER, LAGER...

Researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, have discovered that chimps routinely consume the equivalent amount of alcohol to a bottle of lager each day through eating fermented ripe fruit. They conclude that "Human attraction to alcohol probably arose from this dietary heritage of our common ancestor with chimpanzees", who would have also feasted on fermented fruit. Professor Catherine Hobaiter, a primatologist at the University of St Andrews, says: "What we're realising from this work is that our relationship with alcohol goes deep back into evolutionary time, probably about 30 million years." While chimps have routinely been seen eating ripe fruit from the forest floor, this study was the first to look at how much alcohol they might be consuming by doing so. Researchers measured the amount of ethanol – pure alcohol – in fruits like figs and plums, which are eaten in large quantities by wild chimps in Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda, then calculated how much alcohol these contained. They found that the chimps were ingesting about 14 grams (0.5oz) of ethanol – nearly two UK units, or roughly one 330ml (0.6 pint) bottle of lager – every day by eating fruit. The researchers also noted that the chimps preferentially targeted the fruits that were highest in alcohol, although they were not consuming enough alcohol to become drunk as "this would clearly not improve their survival chances". Hobaiter said, "Maybe for chimpanzees, this is a great way to create social bonds, to hang out together on the forest floor, eating those fallen fruits." *BBC News, 17 Sept 2025.*

KENTUCKY
FISH & WILDLIFE

LEFT: Nurse Misty Combs with one of the raccoons she rescued from a dumpster.

MISTY COMBS

MOONSHINE RACCOONS

While on her way to work at the Letcher County Health Department in Whitesburg, Kentucky, nurse Misty Combs was diverted by reports of a distressed raccoon in the parking lot, so went to check it out. "We heard noises. It was like little chitter-chatters coming from the dumpster. And it was two baby raccoons," Combs said. They had been feasting on fermented peaches in the dumpster, which was filled with leftovers from the manufacture of infused peach moonshine at a nearby distillery. Despite concerns about rabies, Combs still fished the animals out. The first seemed fine, but the second animal was under water in the bottom of the dumpster and was not responsive. "It was not breathing. It was soaking wet, and it was full of water," she said; it also "smelled awful" and was clearly drunk. Combs hauled it out by the tail, and, being trained in CPR, tried to revive the sozzled raccoon. After several chest compressions, "It started coming to, which was a miracle, I thought, because we all thought it was dead." The animal was then retrieved by an officer from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, who took him to a vet to be checked out and given fluids, then released back to the wild. *cbc.ca, 11 Sept 2025.*

DEATH FROM ABOVE

In Richmond, California, residents have been perplexed by dozens of birds exploding in mid-air and falling out of the sky. Witness Maximillian Bolling said, "When it happens, they just quickly explode and it's really violent." Mark Hoehner, who has seen several birds burst, explained: "It sounded like a firecracker, and a black bird – a starling – just plummeted to the ground." Speaking of the "popping" noise several people have heard as birds rupture, he added: "I've been under the birds when it happens, and I know where the sound is coming from. It's coming from up on the pole." The reference to "the pole", a wooden electrical distribution post, resulted in the electrical company asking the Fish and Wildlife Department to inspect the dead birds. They, however, said "the birds show no evidence of electrocution, and that their deaths were caused by trauma, potentially from a pellet or BB gun, or slingshot." Residents discounted this explanation, with Heather Jones saying that "a BB gun doesn't make a firecracker noise – this sounds exactly like a firecracker." Social media posters suggested someone has been feeding birds rice or antacids like Alka Seltzer. It is, though, an urban myth that these make birds burst; birds regularly feed on rice in the wild with no ill effects and can burp to expel any gas build-up from antacids. In Mobile, Alabama, it is pelicans that are falling from the sky, with at least 16 of the birds scattered across the street and on homes on West Stuart Drive. One resident said that she heard two loud booms during a thunderstorm and saw birds on the ground after it passed, while another, Destiny Williams, said: "We looked outside. Sixteen birds just in our yard, nowhere else, just in the yard. This ain't no coincidence, this is the end of the world for real." City animal control, though, confirmed that a lightning strike caused the birds to fall from nearby trees. *notthebee.com, 18 May; wkrg.com, 16 Jun 2025.*

MASSIVE W*NKER

In France, following the passing of a law that bans the use of whales in marine zoo shows, Marineland Antibes closed down in January, but two of their Orcas, Wikie, 24, and her 11-year-old son Keijo, remain in pools on site as the French government and animal rights activists cannot agree on where or how the orcas should be rehomed. In August, though, animal rights group TideBreakers used a drone to obtain footage of the animals, and recorded two trainers "manually stimulating" Keijo as he floats on his back. At the time, his mother was being kept separately, but they do sometimes share a tank, as it is not good for the whales to be kept alone. In a statement, a Marineland spokesperson said that because Keijo is reaching adolescence and has increasingly strong sexual urges, it is necessary for staff to sexually stimulate him to prevent incestuous breeding with his mother, saying "In order to avoid inbreeding with his mother, but also to prevent them from fighting and injuring each other, Marineland decided to sexually stimulate Keijo [to relieve him of his] tensions," adding "Although spectacular, this is natural and totally painless for the animals." The French ecology ministry say that Marineland has informed them that Keijo is being stimulated once a month and that a veterinary expert has been consulted about the process. TideBreakers say "The notion that trainers are providing sexual relief to an orca… is a perverse new low in the captivity industry's morally bankrupt practices." *BBC News, 24 Aug 2025.*

SIDELINES…

CUTE CRIME

After a car chase in Costa Rica, police pulled over a car driven by two men. On searching the vehicle, they found 60 doses of crack cocaine, cannabis and a variety of weapons, including firearms. They also found two adult capybaras and three babies which had been illegally smuggled into the country, where they are not native. The large rodents' placid nature and cute demeanour has made them highly meme-worthy and created an international demand for pet capybaras, which is being partly met by smugglers. *metro.co.uk, 25 May 2025.*

OOP DINOSAUR?

Responding to a report that there was an alligator obstructing traffic on a major highway in Onslow County, North Carolina, officers from the County Sheriff's Office and Wildlife Resources Commission found what they described as a "prehistoric perp" blocking traffic by "loitering or lounging" in the middle of a roadway; a 400lb (180kg), 10ft- (3m) long alligator. Corralling the beast, they took him to a nearby Marine Corps base for safety and issued a statement saying, "Pepe the Gator… has been cited for Suspicion of Being a Dinosaur Without Proper Papers, Public Loitering with Intent to Sunbathe, and Obstructing Traffic". *local12.com, 7 Jun 2025.*

RUNAWAY TRAIN

After stopping for a crew change in Kathua, in Jammu and Kashmir, India, a 53-wagon goods train slipped its brake and rolled away with no one on board. It travelled more than 40 miles (64km), reaching up to 62mph (100km/h), before it was halted in the Hoshiarpur district of Punjab by an official who put wooden blocks on the track. *Metro, 27 Feb 2024.*

STAR LAWS

Massive *Star Wars* fan Christian Mowbray, 48, was surprised when he tried to get a passport for his son Loki Skywalker Mowbray, seven, so the family could go on a holiday they had booked to the Dominican Republic. The Home Office refused to grant him one on copyright grounds, telling the family they needed to get permission from Disney, who own the Star Wars brand, or change their son's name before they could have a passport. "We were not aware this could be a potential issue," said Mowbray, but the Home Office eventually relented and issued the document after all. *D.Star, 19 Sept 2025.*

SIDELINES...

NANOPASTA

Chemists at University College London have succeeded in making the world's thinnest pasta, just 372 nanometres (billionths of a metre) across. They used electrospinning, a technique that involves pulling threads of flour and water through the tip of a needle using an electric charge. The next smallest pasta, *su filindeu* ("threads of God"), is made by hand by a pasta maker in the town of Nuoro, Sardinia, and at 400 microns wide is 1,000 times thicker than electrospun pasta. The lab pasta, though, is not for culinary purposes; it is intended for use as a biodegradable scaffold to help grow tissue and promote wound healing. *ucl.ac.uk/news, 21 Nov 2024.*

PIG BOOM

After discovering a male guinea pig in an all-female pen at the Hatton Adventure World petting zoo in Warwickshire, staff were baffled as to how he could have got there, but now fear a baby boom. Manager Richard Craddock said, "He could have impregnated up to 100 females, who have litters of about four… you do the maths." *Sunday Mirror, 3 Mar 2024.*

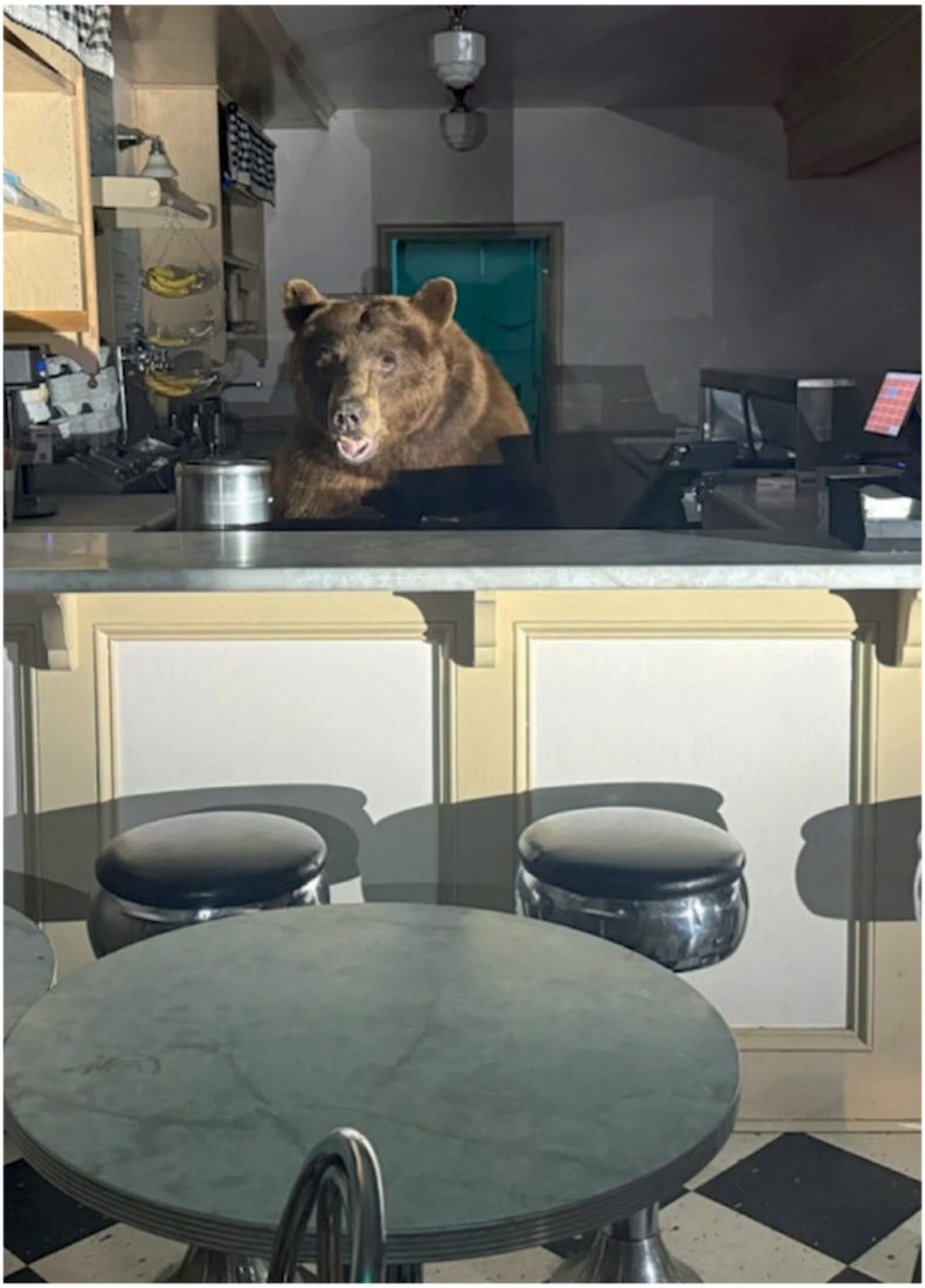
YEASTY BOYS

China has been seized with a craze for "static pets" – mostly inanimate objects such as stones, mango pits and boxes. These fit with the youth trend of "Tai Ping", or "lying flat" which involves withdrawing from the rat race and taking on as little responsibility as possible. Particularly popular are yeast cultures, which are kept in a jar and fed with water, sugar and flour, growing into a gooey bubbling mass. "No need to walk it, no mess, it's worry-free and easy to look after!" said one yeast afficionado, while another commented: "If you don't want to keep it anymore, just add more flour and turn it into steamed buns to eat; there is no psychological burden." *odditycentral.com, 5 Jun 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

BEAR-FACED CHEEK

Ursine invader busted in California ice cream parlour


EL DORADO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Deputies were called to an ice cream parlour in South Lake Tahoe, California, after the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office received reports of an unusual disturbance on 17 August. Entering the shop, they were greeted by the bizarre sight of a bear peering over the counter having apparently broken in looking for something to eat.

According to the Sheriff's Office Facebook page: "In the early morning hours of last Sunday… Deputies were dispatched to a call for service at the Ice Cream Shop at Camp Richardson in South Lake Tahoe. The deputies could barely believe their eyes as they saw a large bear behind the counter of the shop. With some encouragement, the bear ultimately left, but only after showing interest in the strawberry ice cream. "Thankfully, the bear caused barely any property damage, and there was barely any clean-up." *Independent, 17 Aug 2025.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

One of the many mysteries surrounding the 'J6' protests of 2021 has recently resurfaced in conspiracy circles. **NOEL ROONEY** follows its journey from the memory hole to the rabbit hole…

PIPE BOMBER MYSTERY

Nearly five years on, one might think the furore over 6 January 2021 has had plenty of time to settle; governments have come and gone – and come back – and scores of a legal kind have been settled. Prisoners have been pardoned and justice – something of a contested commodity in the US – has been done, undone, and largely forgotten. But there are aspects of the story of 'J6' that have never been adequately explained, and one of those aspects has recently resurfaced.

On the evening of 5 January, and the morning of 6 January, small explosive devices, pipe bombs, were allegedly planted at various locations in Washington; attention at the time was directed to devices planted outside the DNC headquarters (with one Kamala Harris in residence) and one near the RNC equivalent. At first, it got folks pretty excited, but it turned out to be one of those arcane, devil-in-the-detail stories that often accompany big events, only to disappear down a memory hole in the immediate aftermath.

At least, it disappeared from the mainstream; some in the C-sphere were more diligent in their investigations. They exposed a number of details around the incident that appeared deeply hinky. The 'bomber' was caught on CCTV, more or less in the act, and at one point apparently waving to police officers. When the bombs were discovered, the police seemed rather underwhelmed by the find. Surveillance footage shows officers relaxing and chatting within a few feet of the bombs, and happily allowing civilians, including children, to pass close to the device.

Kerkhoff was identified using software that focuses on gait

And now, those same investigators have, they claim, identified the bomber, and opened a family-sized can of worms. The suspect, according to a number of sources, was a serving police officer, who has since left the service to join a three-letter intelligence agency. She has been named on several alternative news media sites as Shauni Rae Kerkhoff. Kerkhoff worked for the Capitol Police for over four years before joining a 'security detail' of the CIA.

Later on 6 January, Kerkhoff is seen again, as part of the police presence around the Capitol building. She is reportedly an expert in the use of 'less lethal' weaponry and, on the fateful day, can be seen discharging a whole lot of such weaponry on J6 protestors. This is a rather strange juxtaposition of functions; a police officer who was part of the defence of the Capitol apparently planting suspect devices (there is some confusion as to whether the devices were viable) in politically sensitive locations.

There are other odd details. Kerkhoff (assuming it was she) used a travel card to get around Washington on the day. The travel card had been purchased almost a year earlier, by a civilian employee of the USAF. That same person allegedly picked Kerkhoff up at a Metro station – Falls Church – after the bombs had been planted. A disgruntled FBI agent has claimed that he was prevented from following up on this information; the Air Force employee, while identified as a person of interest, has never been interviewed in connection with the incident.

This peculiar train of events is, if that's how you care to see it, evidence of a false flag attempt. Or evidence of a rogue police officer, and an accomplice, helping the protestors in a most unorthodox way. But how would the accomplice know to buy a travel card for that particular day, almost a year in advance? Psychic terrorism is not generally recognised as a feature of American life. One can see why some observers suspect foul play on the part of the security state.

One amateur sleuth, going by the social media tag Armitas, has claimed that there is video footage showing the bomber first placing the device at another location (or possibly two) before apparently breaking it and then moving it to DNC HQ. Whether this demonstrates uncertainty – or ineptitude – on the part of the perpetrator(s), or a change of plan by the deep state, rather depends on how one perceives the incident as a whole. But it's passing strange either way.

The face of the bomber is obscured in all the footage. Kerkhoff was identified using software that focuses on posture and gait. Apparently she was a good fit; 94-98%, according to people familiar with the technology. A football injury had left her with a slight limp that showed up on analysis. I have no idea if this level of probability would hold up in court, but it has motivated a good deal of speculation in the meantime.

And it brings me to another observation, something that is happening increasingly often in the C-sphere and alternative media. After years of warning about the dangers of AI, and the potential reach of surveillance technology, I sense a shift that strikes me as ironic. Those same people who have been warning us to steer clear of the oppressive tech now seem happy to employ it.

This is happening in two main ways: first, AI is being used regularly to generate copy; second, it is being used as a fact-checking oracle. The former may be tawdry, but it is probably understandable; language learning is widely touted as a labour-saving device for writers and journalists and it's perhaps inevitable that people on all sides of the political spectrum have started to use it.

The latter is stranger, I think. 'We asked AI', or a similar phrase, turns up all over conspiracist articles online; some outlets, such as Brighteon, have their own pet AI. I can't help feeling that this is like asking the Vatican to fact check a suspected Jesuit plot. On the other hand, the idea that the deep state's favourite spy tech turns whistleblower is delicious to contemplate.

www.theblaze.com/news/former-capitol-police-officer-a-forensic-match-for-jan-6-pipe-bomber-sources-say

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

317: NEVER MIND THE BOLLOCKS

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Have long wanted a chance to celebrate the Sex Pistols. Whatever you may make of Mr Rotten's question to his last audience in America, "Ever got the feeling you've been had?", the Pistols were great fun – my favourite ditties were "Bodies" and "Holidays in the Sun".

One ancient link here. Bishop Athanasius once dubbed pro-Arian hymns (Arius being the leading heretic of the time) "The roughest of songs sung by the roughest of people in the roughest of places" – certainly sounds like the Roxy club where Messrs Rotten and Vicious performed.

Sorry, though, that I know of no evidence for Roman mosh pits or pogo dancing.

An anonymous online statement offers the following food for thought:

"Charles Fort, a self-published author known for his theories on anomalous phenomena, did not explicitly discuss castration in his writings. However, his work, particularly the exploration of *The Book of the Damned* and unexplained events, can be interpreted through the lens of psychoanalysis, specifically the concept of castration anxiety, as some of his theories touch upon themes of fear and loss."

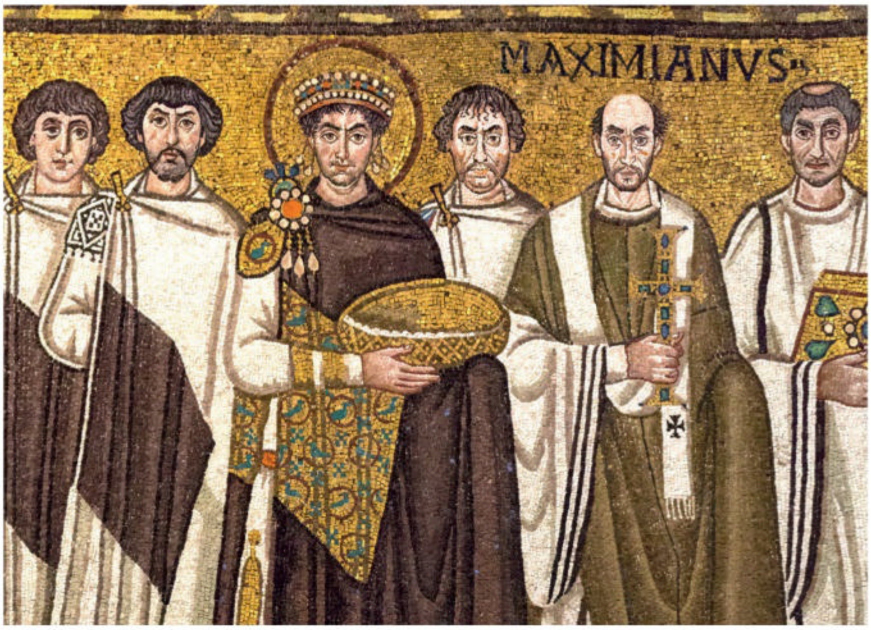
Dear Readers, what do you make of this? All will surely agree that Fort excelled at cutting remarks….

No Freudian nonsense about Complexes here. For a dispassionate survey, see Rob Hardy, "Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159 (2002), also online, plus a (suggestive?) plethora of websites about eunuchs.

Impetus for this column (a complete overhaul of **FT201:21**) was provided by Rod Liddle's typically amusing article in the *Sunday Times* (25 May 2025). Rod in turn was prompted by governmental plans to bring back chemical castration for serious sex offenders, a proposal which at once recalls that most pitiable victim, Alan Turing.

Since 'Byzantium' occurs in Rod's title, with a case history in his text, late antiquity shall come first. He gives his example with characteristic dark humour: "All four sons of Leo V the Armenian discovered their testicles inside their Christmas stockings."

This dashing description is in tune with Edward Gibbon's following remark (*DFRE*, ch68): "He ordered all of them, with the bishop elect, to be castrated, and made all their testicles be brought to him in a platter. Of the pain and danger they might justly complain; yet since they had vowed chastity he deprived them of a superfluous treasure."



ABOVE: Emperor Justinian and members of his court; the figure to Justinian's left is thought to be Narses.

Wikipedia has an excellent article on the unpleasant topic of 'Political Mutilation in Byzantine Culture,' along with a long table of unfortunate victims. Blinding was the commonest, followed by castration, amputations of limbs, and rhinotomy (nose-slitting) – last case of this I saw was that of Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*. One who defied this was Justinian II, proboscis sliced off when first exiled (AD 695), but he managed to return to the throne (AD 705), sporting a false hooter.

Eunuchs played an equivocal role in Byzantium. On the one hand, certain high offices in government were reserved for them: see Keith Hopkins, "Eunuchs in Politics in the Later Roman Empire", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 9 (1963), 62-80. On the other, such big names as Eutropius and Rufinus were routinely excoriated by the influential poet Claudian (full details on him and them in Alan Cameron's 1970 book).

At least two eunuchs commanded Byzantine armies. One was Narses who played a major role in Justinian's conquests. The other was Solomon, strikingly de-balled as an infant, thanks to what was described as "an accident with his bed-clothes", which may say something about the crisp quality of Byzantine linen: see his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.

The Byzantine Church also inaugurated the castration of boy singers to preserve their voices, this going back to choirmaster Brison in the fourth century: full details in Neil Moran's "Byzantine Castrati", *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 11 (2002), 99-112.

This practice was formally banned by the Vatican (1903). Last surviving castrato was Alberto Moreschi who died in 1922. The whole business was reconstructed by Kingsley Amis in his novel *The Alteration* (1976).

The earliest mention of prescribed castration apparently occurs in the Sumerian city of Lagash. First use of the Greek word *eunuchos* is by the sixth-century BC satirical poet Hipponax (fr. 26), applied to a high-living glutton: see Alexander Dale's article in *Phoenix* 71 (2017), 219-29.

Hippocrates (*Air, Waters, Places*, ch22) describes Scythians as "the most eunuch-ed of all nations" because of their high rate of erectile dysfunction (polite term now much used in TV ads for Can't Get It Up).

This coinage is supposed to mean 'bed-guard'. In Eastern and Oriental courts, they were commonly employed to guard harem women. This thinking may have been a trifle naive. I gather from various medical websites that eunuchs can actually achieve erections and weak emissions of spermless semen. It seems that much depends on whether the individual was castrated as a boy or an adult, also on the method used; it could be by knife-cutting or testicle crushing – WARNING: DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME…

For an inventory of Græco-Romano-Byzantine descriptions of de-ballings, see Jacqueline Kônig, *Journal of Ancient History* 9 (2021), 221-37.

Two fragments of the fifth-century BC historian Xanthus's *History of the Lydians* scattered among various secondary source quotations claim that a particular king castrated women. This peculiar claim is investigated by Lydia Matthews, *Classical Quarterly* 65 (2016), 489-99, excerpted online, who unsurprisingly concludes that this was really genital mutilation.

Here, there automatically comes to mind Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970).

Perhaps the most famous eunuch in Greek history was the Persian Bagoas. Mary Renault used him as narrator in *The Persian Boy*, the second novel in her Alexander the Great trilogy. According to Plutarch's biography (ch67 para8), Bagoas won a dancing competition, cheered by Alexander's troops who demanded that the king (already deep in his cups) kiss him, which he did. Henceforth, Bagoas would become one of the few people Alexander trusted.

Centuries later, the satirist Lucian invoked Bagoas in his dialogue *The Eunuch* as an example of someone in this condition who did not deserve to belong to any group of philosophers.

Another high-ranking eunuch was Pothinus, regent of the young Ptolemy XIII, who manœuvred a breach between the young prince and sister Cleopatra. He also organised the killing and decapitation of Pompey, thinking thereby to win Cæsar's favour. A bad miscalculation: the disgusted latter buried his enemy with honours and had Pothinus executed.

In the Taylor-Burton epic, Rex Harrison as Cæsar describes the eunuch's eminence as "a position not achieved without some sacrifice."

The priests of Cybele ('Mother Goddess') routinely slashed off their goolies to 'feminise' themselves. Catullus (poem 63) celebrates (perhaps not the right verb) a lad called Attis, who committed orchiectomy whilst in religious fever, and his lamentations when restored to sanity. His editor Kenneth Quinn (1970) calls this effusion "perhaps the most remarkable poem in Latin." It is written in a very rare metre called 'Galliambic', derived from *Galli*, the standard brand name for these idiots.

Two freedmen ranked high with Claudius. In his biography (ch28), Suetonius says that the emperor in his British campaign celebrations awarded "his greatest favourite" with a pointless spear, thus elevating him to military honours.

Halotus was Claudius's food taster (see **FT462:11**), thereby much suspected by both ancients and moderns of complicity in the emperor's murder (if it was) by poisoned mushrooms.

At this time of writing, Australia is gripped by the trial of Erin Patterson, accused of mycologically bumping off a trio of in-laws.

Sporus (his name may – it is disputed – derive from the Greek for 'semen') was a young slave boy whom Nero in a drastic gender re-assignment had castrated and then married with full nuptial pomp, says Suetonius (*Nero*, ch28 para1). Dio Cassius (bk62 chs 28-9) adds that Sporus had an uncanny physical resemblance to Poppæa, Nero's more orthodox wife whom he had just kicked to death whilst pregnant.

For more on all this, see Andrew Milne's online article, also Alexander Pope who in his *Epistle to Doctor Arbuthnot* likens Lord Hervey (accused of homosexuality) to Sporus, described as "that mere white curd of ass' milk."

Favorinus, a second-century AD philosopher is an anatomical puzzle. Some writers dubbed him a eunuch by birth, others call him an hermaphrodite: in other words, under- or over-endowed. Medical historians call him a case of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, aka Reifenstein's Syndrome – Look it up….

When asked why he had given way to emperor Hadrian over a philological argument, Favorinus replied, "How can you argue with the master of 30 legions?" This foreshadows Stalin's rejoinder when asked if he was not worried by papal criticism: "The Pope? How many divisions does he have?"

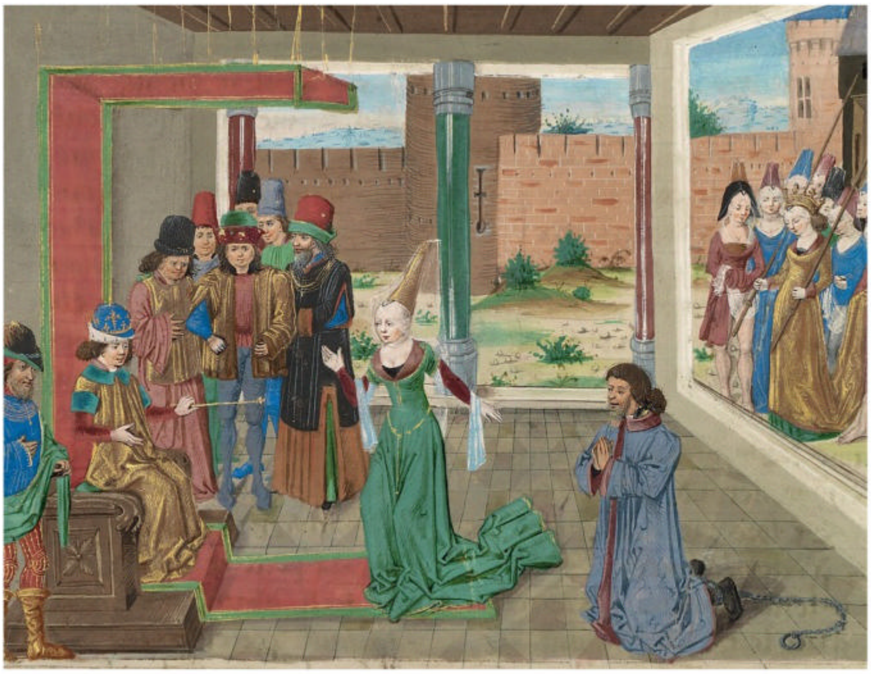
Church Father Origen (AD c. 185-263) is said by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, bk6 ch8) to have castrated himself because of an over-literal interpretation of these words of Jesus (Matthew 19. 12):

"For there are some eunuchs which were so born from their mother's womb, and there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs, and there be some eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

There are many post-classical eunuchs, especially in Chinese annals. The West's most famous case is probably that of Peter Abelard (1075-1142), whilst in modern fiction there is the gigolo Chance Wayne's fate (excluded from the film version – Hollywood left the balls in the other court) in Tennessee Williams' play *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Rex Harrison as Caesar describes the eunuch's eminence as "a position not achieved without some sacrifice"

LEFT: Grégoire Aslan as the eunuch Pothinus in the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*. **BELOW:** The Persian Bagoas, here represented as a woman in a green gown, pleads with Alexander to pardon Nabarzanes in a detail from a 15th century Flemish manuscript.



J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

STRANGE DAYS FESTIVAL 2025

RUTH MORRIS gets off the sofa and goes wild in the country

PHOTOS: BEN BAGLEY AND BEVERLEY THORNTON

LEFT: Richard Freeman quizzes festivalgoers. **BELOW**: Paul Bestall. **CENTRE LEFT**: Organiser Matt Page. **CENTRE RIGHT**: Henge in action. **BOTTOM**: Brian Blessed shares his stories and grabs FT's Ian Simmons.

The weekend of 5-7 September marked the inaugural Strange Days Festival of Forteana. Organiser Matt Page's promise of 'The most extraordinary weekend of your life' was spot-on. Strange Days took place at the Barge Inn near Avebury in a sleepy rural village that had a rude awakening as overloaded cars, campervans and Brian Blessed descended. Freeman's Freaky Fact Fest kicked off the festivities on Friday as teams gathered around haybales to debate the answers to Richard Freeman's mind-boggling trivia. Those who survived the quiz were treated to a set by Mr Teatime (Shaun Amos of The Scribes) who had successfully travelled from the year 2056 with alarming warnings about the future. Paddy Steer came to the rescue with his otherworldly psychedelic tunes, closely followed by Frankenstein's Lobster, and the night drew to a close with the robotic rhythms of the Experimental Sonic Machines. On Saturday morning, campers dragged their bleary behinds to the haybales and the first day of talks kicked off with the FT's very own Couch Potatoes, Stu Neville and, er, me. Our talk on 'The Four Fs of Bigfoot' (Folklore, Footprints, Physics and Photos) seemed to go down well and got things off to a flying start.

Next, it was over to Rob Whitehead, who disconcerted the audience with accounts of Bogus Social Workers reminiscent of the Child Catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Continuing FT's strong representation was Ian Simmons, who took us on an entertaining journey through 50 years of *Fortean Times*, nattily dressed in phenomenal Fort-themed threads (I suspect that Charles himself would have found his appearance on socks unbelievable).

Hotfooting it onto the skull-adorned podium was Paul Bestall, host of the *Mysteries & Monsters Podcast*, who told the lesser known tale of the Runcorn Poltergeist. Paul gave an escalating and tessellating account of the case from three different viewpoints, plaiting them together in the way only he can. Rob Irving discussed a subject synonymous with the location of the festival: "How Crop Circles cured my scepticism", giving a fascinating insight into the intricacies of creating these intriguing patterns. Stepping

ABOVE LEFT: FT's very own Couch Potatoes went in search of Bigfoot – and found him. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Grandaddy of British cryptozoology Jon Downes. **BELOW LEFT**: ultimedia artist and performer Ruby Tingle does her thing. **BELOW RIGHT**: Richard Freeman, cryptozoologist and Uncle Fester lookalike, does his.

out of the fog, Peter Laws, the Couch Potatoes' page-mate and FT horror critic, gave a wise warning against making Ouija boards in woodwork before launching into his excellent talk 'Haunted by Belief'.

Next up, Richard Freeman was back to take us on a fascinating frolic through fire-breathing fables, flying us back in time and around the globe before landing in the modern day at dragon-haunted Waverly Abbey. Next up was Shaun Histed-Todd, who promptly whisked us off to the lost city of El Dorado.

From a lost treasure to a national one. "Gordon's Alive!" It's Brian Blessed, explorer, cryptid-hunter, and legend. Interviewed by the Loremen's James Shakeshaft, 88-year-old Blessed enraptured the audience with his humungous presence and humorous diversions from answering Shakeshaft's questions about yetis. Blessed's distraction techniques included yodelling like Tarzan, blowing raspberries and doing a rather fine Pavarotti impression. By attempt eleven, Blessed treated us to some incredible accounts of his adventures in the Himalayas, the North Pole and Mongolia. These tales were peppered with obscure gems about feeding wolves Mars Bars, cosmonaut training and Ken Barlow. Blessed concluded his talk with sage advice: "Just believe in yourself… get out there and go for it."

Saturday night's entertainment was a sensory smorgasbord, kicking off with QTV's Quentin Smirhes and Comfrey before Crab scuttled onto the main stage, promptly followed by headliners Henge, who treated us to a highly energetic, scintillating and otherworldly musical experience that had the marquee bursting at the seams. The entertainment continued with Linoleum Department and long-time FT contributors Neil Mortimer and Mark Pilkington, aka Luminous Foundation, and concluded with a live recording of the Loremen Podcast.

Sunday started with a thrilling tale of bribery, trespassing and gnome-stealing as paranormal investigator and author Kate Ray (and Wilbur the Gnome), related the intriguing tale of the Wollaton Gnomes. This led nicely into Phil Smith's talk on "Hobgoblinology", featuring an array of photos illustrating how fact can be stranger than fiction. Jackie Tonks captivated the audience with her "Bigfoot Journey", although she was rudely interrupted by the big hairy man himself, who clearly wanted a piece of the action. The day continued with talks by FT's much beloved illustrator Hunt Emerson, ancient stone botherer and homeopath Amanda Townend and the grandaddy of British cryptozoology, Jon Downes. Gef the talking mongoose was the subject of Justin Chubb, Tim Downie and Ed Parnell's engaging talk. The day's talks concluded with occultist and illusionist Sid Quatrine, who performed a magic trick involving a gazelle's horn and auctioned an old human foot.

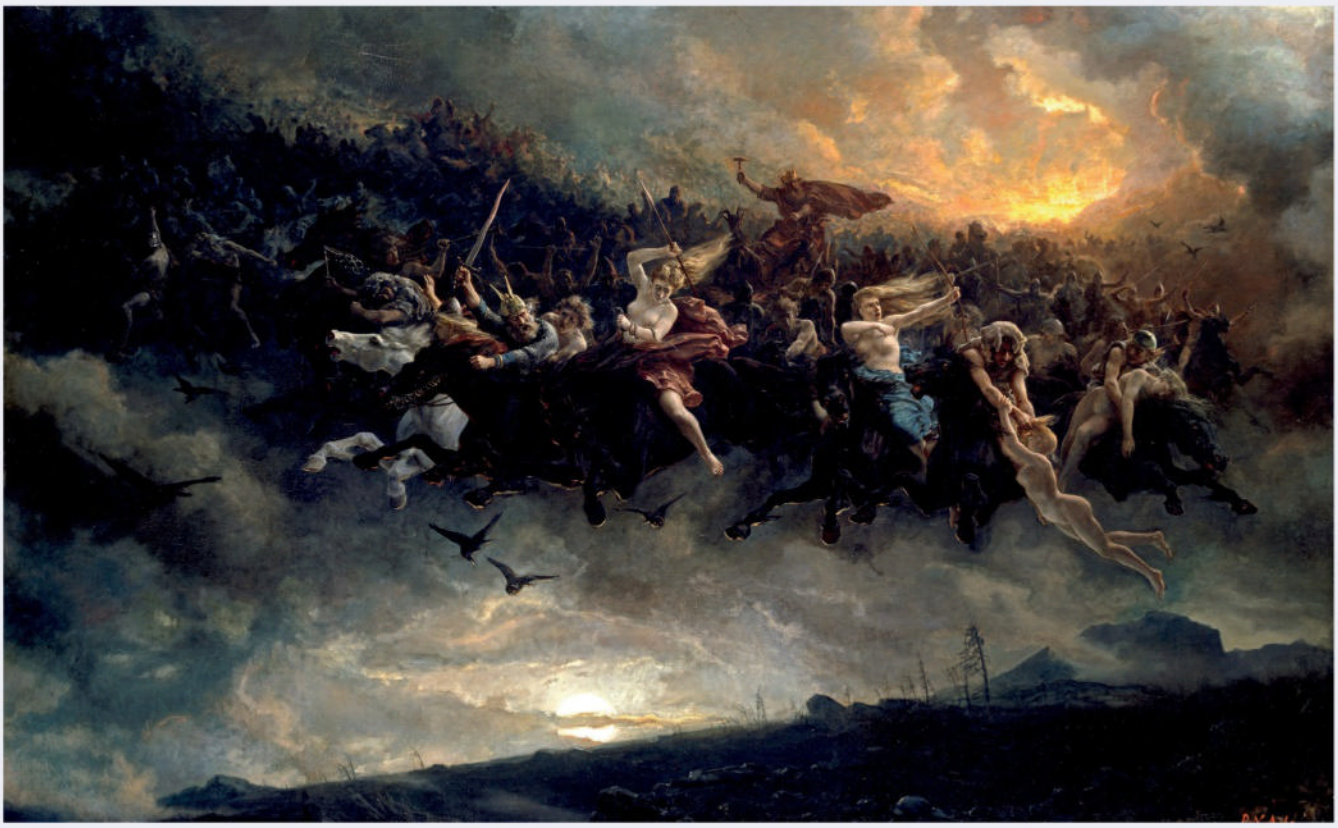
Sunday night's entertainment featured unforgettable performances by the Filing Cabinet of Fear, Maythorne and the hauntingly beautiful Ruby Tingle. The festival was, fittingly, closed by The Real Cheesemakers, Wiltshire's premier nonsense group.

The first Strange Days proved to be a uniquely different festival, and one that reflected current forteana in all its gloriously weird variety. Roll on 2026.

Special thanks to Matt Page, Beverly Thornton, Ben Bagley (Plugged Inn), Richard Freeman and all the staff at The Barge Inn.

Wild riders and noisy ghosts

ALAN MURDIE gets into the Christmas spirit with a gallop through Europe's ghostly traditions



NASJONALMUSEET FOR KUNST, ARKITEKTUR OG DESIGN

ABOVE: *The Wild Hunt of Odin* in an evocative 1872 painting by the Norwegian artist Peter Nicolai Arbo (1831-1892).

With Hallowe'en out of the way, Christmas is the next big ghostly occasion in the UK traditional calendar. But what, one may wonder, of the rest of Europe?

Ghost hunter Peter Underwood called Europe "virtually unexplored as a hunting ground for ghost enthusiasts". Though not as lovingly celebrated as in Britain, the wintertime ghost story tradition exists in Europe, an amalgam and mix of myths, folk tales, 'friend of a friend' urban legends and historical anecdotes buoyed up by moderate levels of ghost belief and refreshed periodically by claims of actual personal experiences.

Between Hallowe'en and Christmas several European nations have by now enjoyed what has been called 'the little Hallowe'en' of Martinmas on the 11 November. This is the feast of St Martin of Tours, the Roman soldier saint, resembling a mini-Christmas and Hallowe'en combined. Yet to undergo a major revival in Britain by devotees of Martin (it clashes with Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday), this festival is still widely marked across Germany and in Flemish regions. St Martin was once revered as an intercessor between the land of the living and the hereafter and for children in Belgium he traditionally descends chimneys on this day, bringing them gifts like Father Christmas, and he is commemorated with bonfires and lantern processions.

The Norse god Odin, or Wotan, was held to ride across the sky with a pack of wild hounds

But thereafter the winter ghost traditions of Europe become grimmer. The pre-eminent legend the Wild Rider or Hunter filling the sharp, clear skies of the North. That much loved Reader's Digest work *Folklore Myths and Legends of Britain* (1973; see **FT427:28-35**) noted this as a Europe-wide tradition, acknowledging its pre-Christian roots originating with the pagan tribes of the North who celebrated Yule.

In the darkest regions of the sub-Arctic when winter was a perpetual night lasting months, Yule spread across 12 days. Outside of the halls with their feasting and raised drinking horns was the dangerous and stormy winter darkness in which the Wild Hunter could be heard. The Norse god Odin, or Wotan, was held to ride across the sky with a pack of wild hounds. They might seize the living and carry them away, with this terrifying manifestation ultimately being given the name of 'the Wild Hunt' by folklorist Jakob Grimm. These legends had lasting effect on German culture, inspiring the novella *Der Schimmelreiter* ('The Rider on the White Horse', 1888) by Theodor Storm; schimmel is a musty white colour evoking the pale discolouration of a corpse).

The Valkyries who guided souls of the dead to Odin's hall in Valhalla, immortalised in music by Wagner, were another accompaniment in the Norse imagination. Professor Ronald Hutton has questioned the concept of the 'Wild Hunt', but the idea of Christmas time as a supernaturally dangerous period associated with phantom riders seems embedded in numerous regional traditions in one form or another. Dipping into local ghostlore in Tortosa in Spain I found traces of it as far as south as the Pyrenees (though beginning earlier, in September, just at the turn of autumn).

In some traditions the hunter leads an army of the dead. Over the following centuries many other identities were given to the wild hunt, including Wütendes Heer and Hellequin's Host.

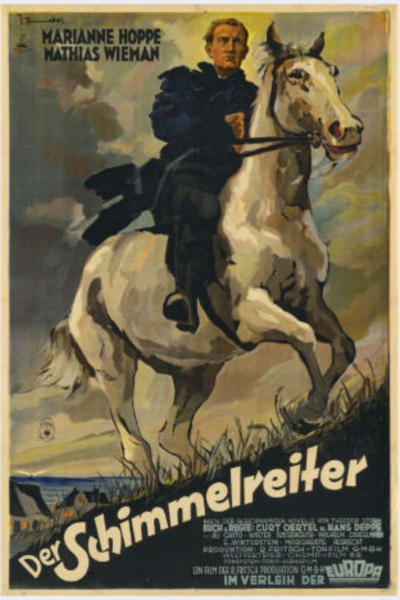
Among later hunt masters were King Arthur and Emperor Charlemagne. Close to the city of Osnabrück in Lower Saxony, Germany, founded by Charlemagne in 780 is a site called Die Karlsteine, a Neolithic site once sacred to the pagan Saxons, whom he violently expelled. The spirits of those slaughtered by Charlemagne's forces are still said to haunt the surrounding area near their once holy site, manifesting at the Solstice on 21 December.

In other traditions the leader of the phantom riders was female, manifestations being linked with Diana, goddess of the chase, or Hecate; also known as Frau Holla/Holda. She may be understood as a composite spectral entity combining elements of classical and Germanic deities prone to roaming at mid-winter.

Following Christianisation, these stories took on a penitential tone; the wandering armies of the dead became lost souls, condemned to Purgatory and sometimes weighed down by shackles representing the chains forged in life (the original for Marley's Ghost in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*). They might have been powerful warlords or wayward clerics. Otto von Graben zum Stein (c.1690-1756) told of a ghostly monk in Prague who between 1 November and 21 December emerged from the gates of the Mount Sion monastery astride a three-legged horse and galloped to the Wenceslas Church and back.

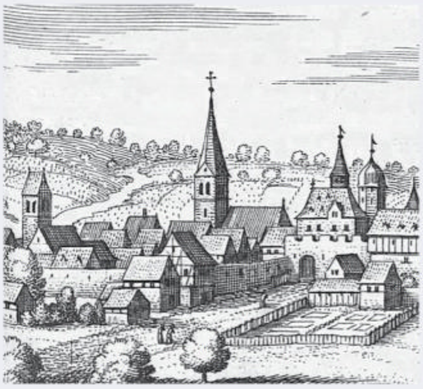
Aside from aerial hosts, the Norsemen also believed in individual ground-based revenants being active in winter; these were perhaps closer to our idea of the walking dead and reanimated zombies. One of the oldest European stories concerning a ghost which systematically sets about ruining Christmas is recorded in the ancient Icelandic *Grettir's Saga* written down in the 11th century. It involves a coarse and unpleasant shepherd of bad character named Glam who is hired by a farmer called Thorall to look after his sheep. Glam commences his job in mid-October. Then on Christmas Eve, he turns up at the farm demanding food from Thorall's devout wife (who is a Christian and fasting). Ignoring her pleas, he bullies her into feeding him before stomping away into a raging snowstorm and vanishing. Unprepared to venture out after him, Thorall and his household wait until daybreak to mount a search. They find Glam's mangled and burned remains in the snow, apparently the victim of an unknown force that left tracks like those of a barrel behind it. They duly bury Glam under a pile of rocks and Thorall appoints a successor called Thorgaut. One year later, on Christmas morning, shepherd Thorgaut is found with his neck broken. By New Year, Glam is regularly rising from the grave to make a nuisance of himself, embarking on a reign of terror through the valley. At night, Glam targets the farm ,killing livestock, and literally frightening Thorall's daughter to death. Climbing on the farmhouse roof he drums with his heels against the building until it is almost ruined (this part sounds like a garbled poltergeist account) Eventually, only Thorall and one old servant remain. Fortunately, the hero of the saga, Grettir, arrives and takes on Glam, eventually overcoming him. Glam has his head cut off and stays in his grave for good. It's a story of the returning sinner or victim of violence that replays itself endlessly across the continent in extraordinary tales for centuries.

SAIL OVER / WIKIPEDIA COMMONS



ABOVE: The Neolihic site of Die Karlsteine, said to be haunted by ghostly Saxon warriors killed by Charlemagne's army. **LEFT**: A poster for the 1934 film version of *Der Schimmelreiter*.

A more historic and better evidenced ghost case, possibly the first example of an official ghost investigation, occurred in the winter of 1323 in the town of Alés in Provence, France. On Christmas Day 1323 (or possibly the Feast of St John the Evangelist, 27 December) an urgent summons was sent by local dignitaries to Father Jean Goby, Prior of the Order of Preachers to attend an alarming haunting which had erupted eight days earlier in the house of Guy de Torno who had died on St Edmund's Day, 20 November.



LEFT: The Château des Noyers in Tourneur, Normandy, home to a noisy poltergeist from late 1875 to early 1876. **BELOW**: The German village of Bergzabern, scene of a poltergeist outbreak in 1852.

Strange noises centred around the bed on which Guy died to the consternation of all who heard them. For it appeared the bed was talking – in the voice of the deceased! Thus, a municipal ghost hunt was instigated, a collaboration between the Church and leading townsmen. Trustworthy observers were positioned outside, while within Father Goby and several assistants positioned themselves so they could watch the bed closely. Guy's widow was asked to lie upon it, next to an elderly woman in Goby's team.

Like many ghost hunts today, nothing unusual occurred on the first night. The Office for the Dead was read and they were rewarded by a sweeping noise and then the sound of a thin voice, claiming to be Guy. A conversation then ensued in which the ghost claimed to be Guy and embarked upon a gushing confession of certain marital sins and of being wracked by the torments of Purgatory. A visual manifestation eventually followed, interpreted by watchers as the luminous form of the late Guy de Torno, with a plea for help in the form of dedicated prayers and masses. In due course Goby turned in an official report for the Papal Court at Avignon.

In his book *Appearances of the Dead* (1982) cultural historian Professor Ronald C Finucane (1939-2009) argued the changeover from once talkative ghosts to the largely silent spectres of today showed that ghosts were cultural products reflecting the beliefs and expectations of their time. Clearly, Prof. Finucane had not heard of the Enfield poltergeist and others, but he is right about the continuity of ghosts. For as European poltergeists keep demonstrating across the centuries, they are no respecters of the Christmas season, as illustrated by more examples of strange hammerings and disturbed beds.

> "It seemed as if there were a carpenter in the attic, striking the beams with his heavy axe... the house trembled"

In 1852 in the Palatine village of Bergzabern (now Bad Bergzabern), one case became a scholarly sensation across Europe. It centred around an 11-year-old girl, Philippine Senger, who fell into trances and spoke in a strange voice accompanied by loud knocking and scratching, which initially seemed to come from a distance but later manifested as loud, forceful blows and wild hammering heard by the child's bedside. The blows intensified until "it seemed as if there were a carpenter in the attic, striking the beams with the blunt side of his heavy axe... the house trembled". Philippine claimed to see a man with an ugly face standing by her bed, seizing and crushing her knees. She was reported to converse with the entity in her sleep, giving instructions on how many times to knock. Eventually, manifestations faded, amid accusations of fraud. [More on this case in an upcoming issue – Ed.]

Another famed case from France was the rackety haunting of Château des Noyers in Tourneur, Normandy, over 20 years later. Between October 1875 and January 1876 it was stricken by a noisy poltergeist active in the bedchambers and granting no respite for either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Sadly, the Château burned down in 1984.

But surprisingly, despite numerous wicked and romantic deeds in European castles across millennia, there are relatively few hauntings fixed specifically to the Christmas period, at least as regards to apparitions; what hauntings there were seem to attach to certain families as death warnings – e.g. the White Lady of the Jagdschloss Grunewald, Germany – and most of the families concerned are now long gone.

This may provide a clue as to why traditional ghosts exhibit a lower profile across much of the Continent. In contrast to England, many European nations have suffered tumultuous invasions and internal revolutions and coups. These have resulted in wholesale social dislocations, meaning fewer castles and mansions were retained by the same family or clan compared with Britain where aristocratic families retained their ancestral piles for far longer. This allowed ghost tales to accumulate along with the antique furniture and silver. True, there are some examples of ghostly revenants in castles at Christmas time. At the Knights Templar Castle at Miravet, Tarragona, Spain, the ghost of Ramon Sa Guardia, the last master who died in the siege in 1308, walks on the night of 28 December.

Naturally, one would anticipate horrors at Frankenstein Castle. Its most famous resident was Johann Konrad Dippel (1673-1734), reputedly an alchemist, a grave robber and proto-scientist (the word was not invented until 1848) and the possible inspiration for Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. His ghost is said to return at Christmas and New Year.

It was here that a famous weaver of modern legends – the ufologist and

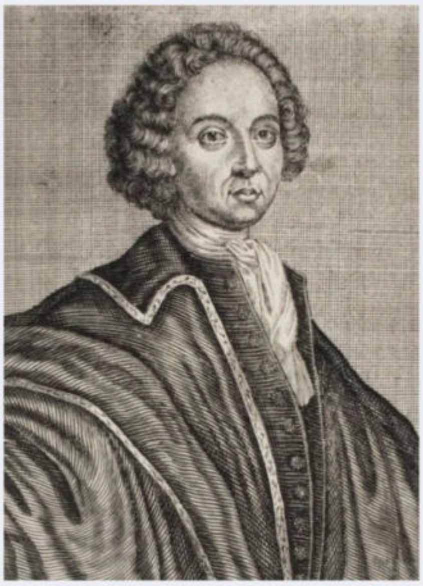
BORIS STROUJKO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Castle Frankenstein in Odenwald, Darmstadt, Germany. **BELOW**: Johann Konrad Dippel, reputedly the inspiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

anomaly writer John Keel (1930-2009) – conducted a radio broadcast for American Forces Radio on Hallowe'en 1952. It was suitably atmospheric – nay hysterical – and while most listening US service personnel were amused and sceptical, apparently "the European public took it seriously", jamming the studio switchboard with calls from half a dozen different countries. Which might suggest that perhaps subliminally these old legends preserve their mystery, giving them a peculiar charm and a capacity to awaken and evoke emotions and uncanny experiences.

And contemporary accounts still occasionally surface, despite a long tradition of European scepticism and rationalism, typified by warnings like that of Johann Beer in *German Winter Nights* (1682) against ghost stories "filled with fabricated and boastful deeds that can't be imitated and in reality, have taken place only in the minds of their hack authors".

At the Royal Palace on Lovön Island in Stockholm in a TV broadcast on 5 January 2017 Queen Silvia spoke of phantom presences at the royal residence, a UNESCO world heritage site dating from the 17th century. Earlier claims concerning the Palace made by members of the Swedish royal family appeared in 2010, when newspaper columnist Herman Lindqvist reported that King Carl Gustav XVI had told him of his belief that the Palace might contain at least two ghosts. The King normally gave non-committal answers to enquiries about ghosts, but privately he conceded much was not understood.



Candidates for the identity of the spectres include King Haakon of Norway, King Frederick of Denmark and King Gustav of Sweden. Apparently, previous Swedish monarchs – though not the current king – saw the figure of a 'grey man', described as small in stature and wearing an old-fashioned coat with hood. This figure haunts the north wing, the oldest part of the Palace. Such mild hauntings do seem a bit of a come down from the Wild Riders and Hunters of old…

Sources: *A Ghost Hunter's Guide* (1985) Peter Underwood; 'Medieval English 'Martinmesse': The Archaeology of a Forgotten Festival' (2000) by Martin W Walsh in *Folklore* Vol 111 pp.231-254; 'The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination' (2019) by Ronald Hutton in *Folklore*, 130(2), 175-191; *Ghosts of Place and Spirits of War: Spectral Belief in Early Modern England and Protestant Germany* (2018) by Aidan Anthony O'Lynn, Univ. of Bristol thesis; *Haunted Houses* (1924) Camille Flammarion; '"Plötzlich erhob sich die Bettlade" Ein Klopfgeist 1852/1853 in Bergzabern' (2020) by Ulrich Magin in *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik* vol 20 pp 168-177; 'Sweden's Queen Silvia says palace is haunted by ghosts', *BBC News*, 4 Jan 2017.

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER asks if praying mantises are colonising the UK and hears tales of giant spiders

PRAYING FOR INSECT INSIGHT!

The European praying mantis *Mantis religiosa* has breeding populations on the Isle of Wight and the Channel Islands, yet only a very occasional vagrant individual or two have been reported from mainland Britain – but that may all be about to change. Earlier in 2025, the Cornwall Wildlife Trust (CWT) identified a number of specimens discovered inhabiting gardens near Truro and Mousehole, and the CWT has speculated that these individuals may have been blown across the English Channel from mainland Europe by strong winds.

Traditionally native to southern Europe, this unmistakeable insect species has been gradually expanding its range northward on the Continent due to increasing temperatures there, presumably caused by climate change, leading to the opinion offered by the CWT that it is only a matter of time before it becomes an established breeding species in Britain. Judging from the Cornish specimens, perhaps this insect invasion has already begun. Alternatively, they may simply have stowed away in the luggage of tourists returning to England from European holidays, or are escapee pets. However, no one has claimed any of them, and the fact that they have been found in gardens scattered over a wide area also seems to rule out this latter option as a likely one.

Meanwhile, British entomologists are hoping to obtain more insight into these mystifying mantids' origins, just in case they truly represent the first colonists of their species to set up home and begin breeding here in Great Britain, just like the European stick insect *Bacillus rossius*, another originally non-native species, and distantly related to mantids, has already done in Cornwall.

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/praying-mantis-cornwall-truro-mousehole-stick-insect-b2837962.html, 2 Oct 2025.

MORE LOUISIANA MEGA-SPIDERS!

On my ShukerNature blog, I have included the very extensive, highly detailed testimony of an American soldier who claims to have encountered giant spiders in and around Fort Polk, Louisiana. Ever since, I've been hoping to obtain further reports, but from other, hopefully independent eyewitnesses that may corroborate his testimony. In October 2023, I finally did, from Facebook friend and fellow cryptozoological investigator Rich Janusz of Connecticut. With Rich's kind permission, I documented his account on ShukerNature (see link below) on 13 October 2023, but more recently I have received two further testimonies, in the form of comments posted by a couple of anonymous readers below Rich's account. Although they are anonymous, I feel that they are sufficiently intriguing to warrant publication here in Alien Zoo. The first was posted on ShukerNature on 20 June 2024, and it reads as follows:

I live in Leesville, Louisiana. Back in 1989, there was a brush fire near our home. Which I think ultimately contributed to my encounter. But say what you want, laugh, believe me or don't. It doesn't matter. I can tell you, my mother was also a witness. Boy, we encountered a huge spider that was the size of a small shop-vac. Was brown, no mistaking what we saw. Was at a distance of about 20ft [6m]. It was big enough to know that we were in danger. My mother went to get a gun and it retreated. There were drag marks where it crossed the road. And as we were easing past, I could see as it parted the tall grass as it went through back into the woods... there is more out there than people realize.

The second was posted on ShukerNature very recently, on 6 September 2025:

While some don't believe it, I was born and raised in the northeastern part of Louisiana, and lived in southeastern Arkansas, I remember when I was seven in Louisiana, seeing a spider with a span of 14 inches [35.5cm]. Had it stretched its body, it would have been a foot and a half [45cm] in diameter, and at 15 living in Arkansas 15-20 minutes from the Louisiana border near Morehouse Parrish where I used to live, I saw something that no one would have believed, a spider, grey in colour and three foot [91cm], coming towards me and I screamed and jetted across the street to a church parking lot and the spider jetted in the other direction fast. When people tell you they have seen things, it's normally years later before it's mentioned because we are often called crazy, but we see what we see.

When receiving reports of physiologically improbable (but not impossible) creatures like giant spiders, and especially if those reporting them choose to remain nameless, extreme caution needs to be applied when attempting to assess them – all of which and much more I've commented on elsewhere in my articles and book chapters dealing with mystery mega-spiders. Nevertheless, confident zoological predictions that this or that cryptid cannot possibly be real have been disproved enough times for me to reserve judgement, and content myself with making such reports available for public. So make what you will of these giant spider accounts – but at least they are now preserved within the cryptozoological and fortean archives of anomalous animals. *https://karlshuker.blogspot.com/2023/10/louisianas-giant-spiders-independent.html, 13 Oct 2023, plus comments posted below on 20 June 2024 and 6 Sept 2025.*

KARL SHUKER

TOP LEFT: The European praying mantis – an unexpected new addition to British wildlife? **ABOVE:** Karl Shuker with an outsize arachnid friend.

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STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN presents his regular round-up of the weirdest news from across Europe

ABOVE: A farmer uses his motorcycle to evacuate a sheep from a wildfire in Patras, Greece, last August.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

DIARY OF A MAD CONTINENT

I read recently that scientists allegedly agree that there is no increase in extreme weather events and conditions. If that's so, the journals I checked must not yet have got the memo. The German Helmholtz Institute warns that dangerous weather extremes are increasing, and the German Meteorological Service says studies have shown that extreme weather occurs more often each year. Summer 2025 seemed to demonstrate this.

In just one week we had forest fires near Madrid in Spain and Martigues in France (18 July); torrential rains in southern and eastern Germany (21 July); 40°C temperatures in Greece and Turkey, and 32°C at the North Cape, Norway (22 July). Fires and torrential rain continued for at least a week. Early in August, tennis-ball-sized hail hit Rimini in Italy, and forest fires continued to devastate Portugal. On 5 August, extreme heat was recorded in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Turkey, with forest fires in the south of France at Narbonne; on 6 August, fires spread around Tarifa, Spain. On 11 August, 40 wildfires broke out in Albania. In Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, temperatures went above 42°C. On 12 August, fires burned around Madrid and in the province of León in Spain. Heat warnings were issued all over southern Europe, including the Balkans. France recorded heat records in at least five communities, all above 42°C. In Greece, tourist spots were closed after noon to avoid death through heat exposure, and wildfires erupted on the island of Zakynthos. On 13 August, forest fires had to be fought around Patras, Greece, and in Spain, Italy, Albania, and Turkey. On 16 August wildfires devastated Portugal and Spain. Heat also melts the permafrost, and so there were landslides in the Alps in Switzerland, in Germany at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and on 20 August a giant boulder detached itself from a cliff at Égratz near Chamonix, France, hit a holidaymakers' car and killed the whole family. On 24 August, severe storms and rains hit and flooded parts of the Adriatic coast of Italy around Rimini and disrupted railway traffic.

A boulder hit a holidaymaker's car and killed the entire family

Added to this were violent upheavals of the earth, unconnected, certainly but no less destructive: on 17 July the eruption of a volcano on Iceland; a 4.0 quake near Naples on 18 July with the epicentre at the Phlegaean fields; on 11 August a quake in Turkey; and on 26 August a minor eruption of Etna on Sicily.

ZOOS VS ANIMALS

In July 2025, Nuremberg Zoo told the public they had to destroy 15 baboons because they could no longer house them and no other zoo was willing to take them. They had 40 of the animals, but room for only 25. Outrage and protests followed, but the zoo still killed the surplus endangered creatures. They were later fed to carnivores in the zoo.

Roughly at the same time, Aalborg Zoo in Denmark asked locals for unwanted pets to feed their lions, lynx and tigers. They said they could make good use of sheep, horses, guinea pigs, rabbits, goats and ponies which their owners no longer needed. They didn't want dead animals, but living ones, as the meat needed to be fresh. *RTL, 4 Aug; General-Anzeiger, 5+6 Aug 2025.*

ANIMAL ATTACKS

Continuing the zoo theme, kangaroos were mutilated in Solingen Zoo in mid-April around Easter 2025. Two of the marsupials were found dead, their heads cut off. Police assumed the animals had been beheaded by someone with a knife and searched for a person or persons unknown. However, DNA analyses in July showed that the heads had been severed by either a dog or a fox, though how they managed to enter the animal's enclosure is not stated. *web.de, 29 July, 7 Aug 2025.*

In July 2025, an 85-year-old woman swimming at the Playa de Palma, in Majorca, Spain, was bitten by an unknown sea creature and the beach was closed. Soon, news went around it had been a blue shark, one of which had recently been observed off the island. However, marine biologist Aniol Esteban pointed out that the bite wounds didn't match those of any shark and were those of a stingray. He also pointed out that being attacked by a shark in the Mediterranean was somewhat less likely than winning the lottery. *General-Anzeiger, 28 July 2025.*

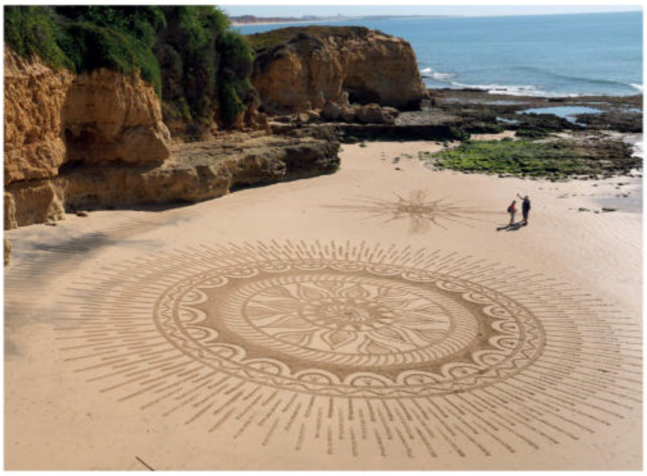
In the Netherlands a wolf tried to drag a six-year-old child into a forest near Utrecht on 30 July. The boy and his family were at the pyramid of Austerlitz east of the city and the child was playing in the woods when a wolf approached and bit him. The parents beat the animal with a stick until it released their son, whom they quickly took to hospital. A DNA analysis was planned to confirm the attack, and warnings of wolf attacks were being issued weeks later. *web.de, 1 Aug 2025.*

It's not always carnivores on the attack. On 1 September, a Vienna couple was hiking near Ramsau am Dachstein when a herd of cows stormed towards them and trampled them, killing the 85-year-old husband. The 82-year-old woman was badly injured, but survived. The couple was on an official hiking path, and it was assumed that a dog had frightened the herd. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn, 2 Sept 2025.*

ROUND IN CIRCLES

Crop circles were few in continental Europe, and I found only one specimen, in a wheat field at Frieding near Andechs on Lake Ammer, Bavaria, Germany. It was discovered on 19 July, and was a 3-D design somewhat like a coronavirus within a ring with a meander pattern. The farmer harvested the design within 24 hours of its discovery "to save the wheat". The size of the circle was not stated, but it spanned some five tractor lines. *abendzeitung-muenchen.de, 24 July; merkur.de, 25 July 2025.*

I couldn't trace any examples from the usual places in Italy and Spain, but one may find beautiful circular patterns on the Algarve beaches in Portugal. These are being drawn into the sand by 56-year-old artist Vitor Raposo on the eastern end of Maria Luísa Beach near Albufeira. These are large and resemble traditional crop circle designs drawn into the wet sand; they are later erased by the incoming tides, so only last for a few hours at most. Raposo started making sand circles some years ago. "I was already spending a lot of time at the beach, setting up giant cairns. I decided to try sand painting and was very surprised by the results, especially when viewed from the cliffs. Surprised, because I've never had an artistic streak and I can't do anything with paper and pen. I really can't draw on paper, but here, in the sand, there are almost no limits," the artist says. He never does sketches in advance; his ideas come to him spontaneously on the way to the beach or while he works there. He uses rakes, broom handles and iron bars for his art, and creates flowers or mandalas. "When the weather is fine, there are often up to 100 people standing on the cliffs. I'm so engrossed in my work that I don't notice until they applaud at the end." While Maria Luísa Beach is his favourite spot, his work can be found at other Algarve beaches, too. *https://entdecken-sie-algarve.com/leben-und-kultur/kunst-kultur/sandmalerei/*



LEFT: One of Vitor Raposo's beautiful sand circles on an Algarve beach.

STIMMUNGSBILDER1 / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

HOLSTEIN HUM

The mysterious "hum" is a global phenomenon, and only in the rarest of instances can experts with sophisticated technology ever trace an origin for it. The latest example comes from Nortorf in Schleswig-Holstein, northern Germany. For a year, a mysterious deep humming sound has disturbed the 7,000 inhabitants of the village, especially at night. The noise was first noticed in August 2024. One of those driven to despair, local resident Melanie Libbe, has offered a reward of 1,000 Euro for anyone who can solve the riddle. "You are in the room and have the feeling that there is a car with its engine running in front of the house," she told the tabloid *Bild*. She investigated a manhole cover at night to find whether the sounds came from there, but to no avail. "There was one morning when I broke down crying and said, 'I don't want to live anymore, I can't go on.' I truly had a nervous breakdown." Other residents hear or feel vibrations too, and Libbe has prepared a map showing these locations. She has even searched the local branch of Aldi. Libbe keeps a log of the occasions she can hear the hum and has checked with a local foundry, but the timings of the hum and activity there do not coincide. The local State Environmental Agency has been informed, but they also failed to trace any source for the sound. "There were several companies that we considered possible sources. But it could also be coming from a heating system, for example, in a private home. We'll keep at it and see if we can identify the source and then take appropriate action," said an Agency spokesperson. *web.de, 21 July 2025.*

100 YEARS AGO

In December 1925, newspapers reported on the haunting of a house in Clermont in France, although, as usual, they did so in a jocular way (that much hasn't changed):

"The Haunted House in Clermont. Mysterious Knocking Ghost. The police and residents of Clermont are in a state of alarm over the appearance of a knocking ghost in the house of the widow Douvry. The ghost knocks on the walls and ceiling and makes contemptuous remarks about the police who are pursuing it. The strangest thing is that it is only a very small, one-story house with a low attic where no one can hide. But night after night, Mrs Douvry is disturbed by the ghost, while neighbours keep watch with her and the police guard the house. The knocking did not stop even when impartial observers searched the attic. Recently, a Spiritualist attended the involuntary séance and asked the ghost to knock if it were present. The response was a violent knocking on the wall. When threatened with a shot through the wall to neutralise the perpetrator, the knocking only intensified. The 'ghost' passed an even more difficult test when a police lieutenant asked it to knock where he put his hand on the wall and the spot was exactly hit. When the Spiritualist present asked the spirit to recite the first letter of his, the questioner's, name, the spirit readily complied. Upon request, it also tapped out the Marseillaise, but refused to tap out the Internationale; thus, it was a patriotic spirit. The police continued their investigation, and numerous volunteer guards arrived, but so far, the only success was that two of these guards severely beat each other because they mistook each other for the spirit." *Hannoverscher Kurier, 6 Dec 1925.*

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Further strange developments in stories previously reported in the pages of FT

PHIL WILKINSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: The Kubalan 'royal family' before their eviction from woods near Jedburgh, Scotland. **BELOW**: Fraudster Jacky Jhaj, detained by police after his latest bizarre stunt.

KINGDOM OF KUBALA [FT463:8-9]

Having set up the "Kingdom of Kubala" in woods on the edge of an industrial estate near Jedburgh, Scotland, in the spring, Kofi Offeh, 36 from Ghana, Jean Gasho, 42, from Zimbabwe and Kaura Taylor, 21, from Texas (AKA King Atehehe, Queen Nandi, and Lady Safi) were evicted by five sheriff officers on 16 September. They claimed that the land was rightfully the property of their African "tribe" because King Atehehe was a descendant of the biblical King David, whose kingdom of Zion was not in the Middle East as generally accepted, but in Scotland, and had been stolen from them 400 years ago.

The tribe did not move far though; having been forced off the private land where they had set up camp, they merely hopped over a wire fence and re-established themselves on adjacent council-owned property a few metres away, necessitating a whole new set of legal proceedings to remove them. These came to fruition on 2 October, when the area was cordoned off and a convoy of police, sheriff's officers and immigration enforcement officials swarmed in to remove the trio, who livestreamed the whole process to TikTok. Offeh and Taylor were arrested for suspected immigration offences, although Taylor was later released, while Gasho left the site lying in the back of a pickup truck with her head covered. Council staff then moved in and dismantled the camp, turfing everything into the back of a refuse lorry, while courts passed injunctions preventing the trio from either returning to private land or continuing to camp on council property. Jedburgh and district councillor Scott Hamilton said he was "very much relieved" by the eviction. Gasho and Taylor then regrouped in a nearby flat, where they painted the Kubala symbol on the door and could be seen gathering leaves and branches and taking them indoors, while Offeh remains detained by Immigration Enforcement pending further action. Following the eviction, Gasho posted a message on social media, saying, "The Kingdom of Kubala is strong and alive", while the Home Office has refused to comment on the situation.

Following the eviction of the Kubalans, Ghanaian singer Afua Asantewaa, best known for trying to break marathon singing world records, revealed that King Atahehe had invited her to join the Kingdom of Kubala. She said "I got an email from the Kubala family, some months ago if not a year, and I remember vividly that the Kubala King told me that I am a queen and I deserve to be in the Kubala kingdom," adding, "He actually said nice things to me and one of the key things he told me was to keep singing," although she turned down the offer. It was also revealed that a former handmaiden who had fallen out with the King and Queen and been cursed by them had died in the US. Four months after A'liya Johnson came to the UK in March 2023 to join the Kingdom, then based in a flat in Stockton-on-Tees in County Durham, she decided the tribe was "a false reality" and angrily left. The King responded by posting a video on social media saying, "We are done", cursing Johnson to "cry until she dies", adding that "If this doesn't happen then there is no God in Kubala." Shortly after Johnson returned home to Oklahoma City in the US, she was involved in an accident where she was struck by a car and then a bus while crossing the road, dying instantly. *dailymail.co.uk, 15 Sept; BBC News, 16 Sept, 2 Oct; dailyrecord.co.uk, 5 Oct; thescottishsun.co.uk, 6 Oct; scotsman.com, 7 Oct 2025.*

A handmaiden had been cursed by them and had died in the USA

JACKY JHAJ [FT445:25]

Fraudulent event organiser and convicted pædophile Jacky Jhaj, not content with staging the premier of a non-existent film in Leicester Square, London, and an extravagant fake funeral for a missing Latvian man at the London Oratory Roman Catholic Church, has struck again, this time in Paris.

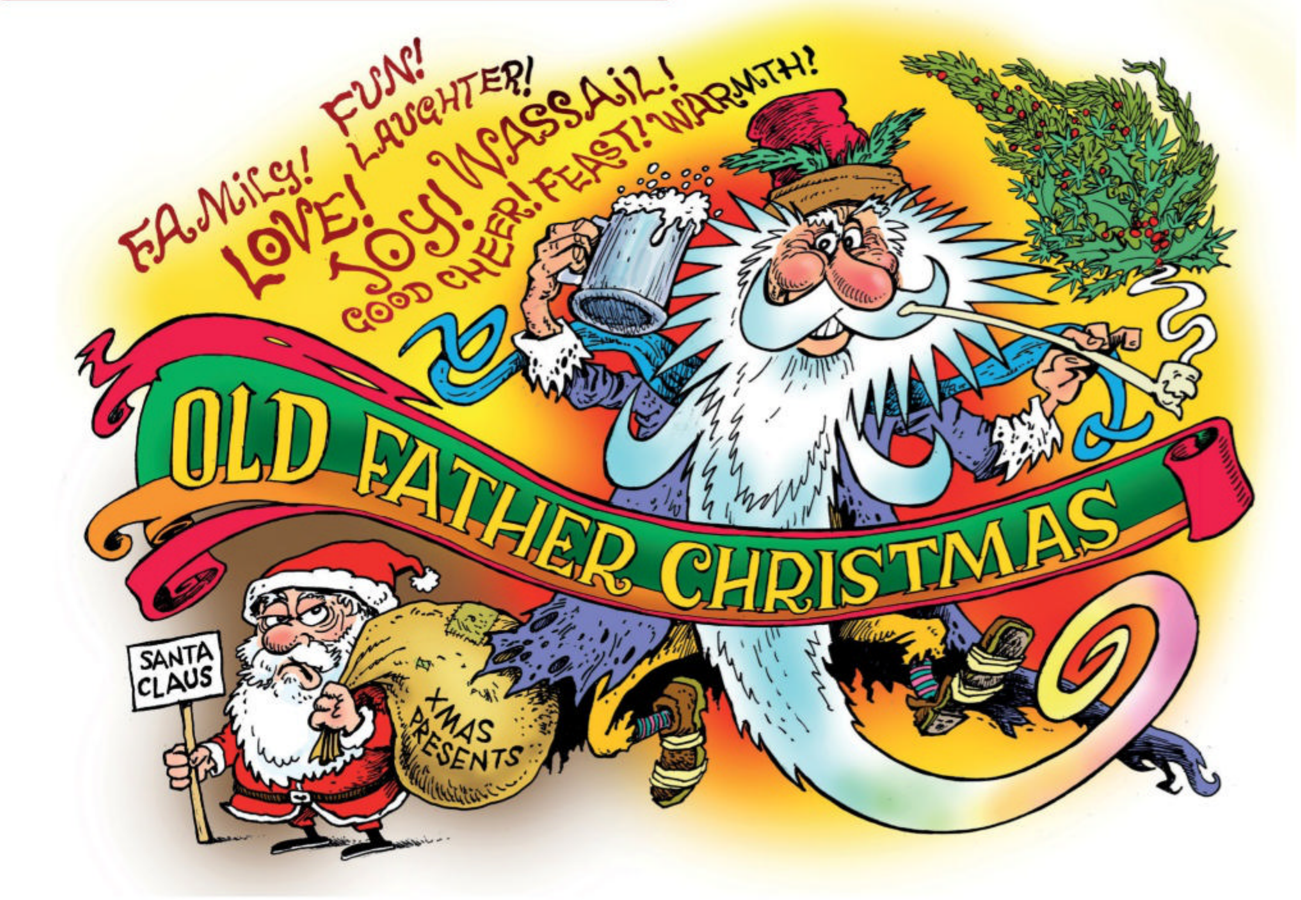
Jhaj, 39, has ended up in detention on charges of fraud, breach of trust, money laundering and identity theft after staging a fake wedding ceremony in Disneyland, Paris, in which the "bride" was a nine-year-old Ukrainian girl. Jhaj reportedly hired the theme park for several hours early one morning in June, before public opening hours, employed a crew to film the wedding, recruited 100 French extras to play guests, and paid a man 12,000 Euros (£10,383) to pose as the father of the bride. The wedding was only halted when the "father" arrived, found the "bride" was a child, and alerted Disneyland staff to the fraudulent nature of the event. Jhaj, who was playing the role of "bridegroom" was reported to have been "made-up professionally so that his face appeared totally different from his own", and was apparently assisted in staging the stunt by the girl's 41-year-old mother, a 24-year-old Latvian woman, who was to play the bride's sister, and a 55-year-old Latvian man; they were also arrested, but later released. The nine-year-old, who had only arrived in Paris two days before, was reported to have been treated well and was not a victim of physical or sexual abuse, nor had she been "forced to play the role" of the bride.

Jhaj had hired the park using a fake Latvian identity and it may have cost him more than 130,000 (£110,000) to stage the "mock wedding". It remains unclear what the purpose of any of Jhaj's stunts is, or where he gets the funds from to stage them, although, despite his lack of profile or any visible success, his YouTube channel appears to have 12 million subscribers. *BBC News, 24, 25 Jun 2025.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward **Illustration by Hunt Emerson**

297: THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN CHRISTMAS


FAMILY!
FUN!
LOVE!
LAUGHTER!
JOY!
WASSAIL!
GOOD CHEER!
FEAST!
WARMTH!
OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS
SANTA CLAUS
XMAS PRESENTS

The myth

Father Christmas delivers your children's presents.

The "truth"

If he's leaving gifts, he isn't Father Christmas. That's not what FC does. The first personification of Christmas that we know of today was Sir Christëmas, who appears in a 15th century English carol exhorting people to "be right merry". The Lords of Misrule (see **FT400:48-51**) who compèred the long Christmases in noble houses during the Early Modern period were often given titles for the duration, such as 'Captain Christmas' or 'The Christmas Lord', but there was still no suggestion of an individual with supernormal powers. Or, indeed, of a geezer with a beard. For that, we had to wait until the culture wars of the 17th century.

For conservatives, the (largely imaginary) old-style Christmases of Merrie England symbolised everything that was good about the past, and everything which had been lost in the modern world: the grand old religion instead of the stark new one, deference instead of meritocracy, the benevolent paternalism of feudalism instead of the ruthlessness of capitalism. And by the middle of the century, of course, Christmas was a reminder of the supposed stability of monarchy against the turbulence of republicanism. For liberals, Christmas meant superstition, aristocratic sybaritism, counter-revolution and a nostalgic wallowing in the stagnant past.

This battle was fought in Parliament, in the streets, in the press and on the stage. In 1616 playwright Ben Jonson had a character called Old Gregorie Christmas, who sported a long beard and archaic clothes. In the 1640s and 1650s, the Old Father Christmas who appeared in anti-Puritan pamphlets was a rather pathetic figure – forgotten by the common people, persecuted by Parliament. After the Restoration, when Christmas was no longer needed as a political weapon, it somewhat lost its importance in British life until the much-discussed revival of the 1840s.

Father Christmas had survived the years of irrelevance, emerging from hibernation when Christmas itself did, now as a representative spirit (and sometimes actually a sprite) of winter in general, and of festive fun (booze, food, games) specifically. But still, in all these hundreds of years, no Christmas figure had ever given anyone a set of Meccano, a dolly that does real wees, or even a small bag of mint humbugs. In any case, gift-giving was associated with the New Year, not with Christmas.

Historians often talk of the "invention of childhood" in the Victorian period, and as Christmas became a celebration centred on children, the home, and consumerism, so at last an elderly immortal, wearing red and smoking a long pipe, began distributing swag to kids. But it wasn't Father Christmas – it was Santa Claus.

The genealogy of SC is more complicated than often imagined, and beyond the scope of this piece, but we can say that he shares little, if any, blood with FC. Santa's first mention in the British Isles is in the 1850s, and by the 1870s he was well established here. It's sometimes said that FC and SC gradually merged, but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that Santa absorbed Father Christmas, leaving nothing behind but his name; since then, Father Christmas has simply been a local term for Santa Claus, the chimney-and-reindeers man, having no real connection to Old Father Christmas.

Those offended by the Americanisation of British culture will wince, but the truth is that the Christmas Eve tradition of a gift-giver with a sack of toys, in the UK as in the US, began with Santa Claus, not Father Christmas. By the time FC delivered his first present, he was no longer FC.

OUT OF THE HEAVENS

Plummeting space debris or meteorite hits? Stuff falling from skies has been doing some serious damage of late

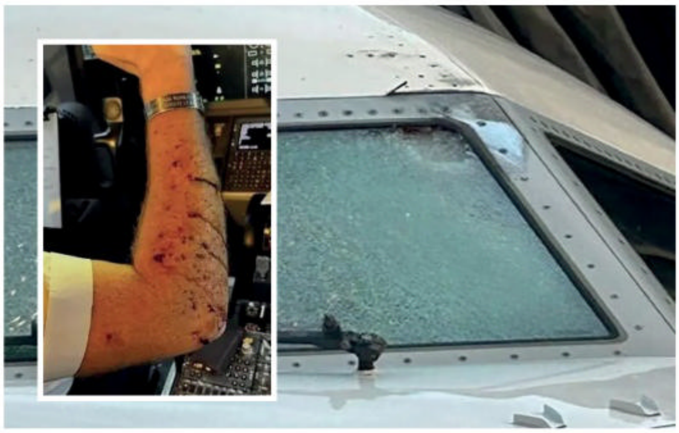
MUSK HITS MUSK?

On 19 October vet Andrew Melville-Smith was driving near the Spencer Gulf in South Australia in his new Tesla Model Y when there was a deafening explosion and he and his passengers were showered with glass from the windscreen as the car filled with white smoke and a smell of burning. "I thought we'd crashed," Melville-Smith said. "I was in shock; I remember wiping glass particles from my face and being completely disoriented." His wife said, "The car's blown up," while Melville-Smith himself "thought someone had fired a shotgun at us." But apart from a shattered windscreen, the car was fine, and he kept on driving. Melville-Smith credits Tesla's self-driving mode for keeping them safe, saying, "If we were in any other vehicle, we would have crashed during those moments of incapacitation, the [Full Self-Driving] system kept us safe."

When he took the car for repair, though, mechanics noted that the windscreen hadn't just been shattered, it had melted – something they had never seen before. As automotive glass melts at 1500°C (2700°F), they had no idea what could have caused it. Melville-Smith sent photos of his cratered windscreen to the South Australian Museum, where Minerals and Meteorites Collection Manager Dr Kieran Meaney was initially sceptical about meteorite claims, but on seeing the windscreen said "It was certainly hit by something and it was something hot, and we don't have another good explanation for what else it could have been". The museum then took samples to see if they could confirm the damage had been caused by a meteorite but have not yet released their conclusions. If it was a meteorite, it would be the first case on record of one striking a moving car.

Astrophysicist Jonti Horner, from the University of Southern Queensland, doubted it was a meteorite, though, as while they get very hot as they streak through the upper atmosphere, they slow and cool by the time they land, so a meteorite should not have been hot enough to melt glass. In addition, it should have been visible to witnesses over a wide area as a bright light streaking across the sky in the moments before the impact, but no reports of any such sightings have been received. Dr Ellie Sansom of the Desert Fireball Network said that while the alternative, space debris, is likewise seldom hot enough to melt glass, it is a more plausible explanation than a meteorite. However, identifying where the debris came from would be very difficult, but it is possible that it came from a deorbited, defunct Starlink satellite, which would mean that falling debris from Elon Musk's satellite company had shattered the windscreen of a vehicle from his car company. *iflscience.com, 31 Oct 2025.*

@JONNYC / X



> *"It pulverised part of the material down to literal dust fragments*

PLANE STRIKE

If the object that struck Melville-Smith's car proves to be a meteorite, it may not be the only one that broke a vehicle's windshield that month. On 16 October, a United Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 8 flight from Denver to Los Angeles was forced to divert to Salt Lake City after its windshield was cracked in mid-air at 36,000ft (11km). Rather than being a routine structural crack or a bird strike – the usual causes of aircraft windshield damage – this appears to have resulted from a high-energy impact, as it left scorch marks and bruised the pilot's arm. Photos of the exterior taken after landing show impact damage to the corner of the windshield and scrape marks on the window frame and adjacent fuselage.

Investigations into midair collisions routinely take more than a year, so no definitive conclusions as to what caused the damage are expected soon. There is, though, speculation that the plane was hit by a meteorite or space debris, as there is little else that could cause this level of damage at such an altitude. There are no previous records of airborne planes being struck by meteorites or space debris, but while aircraft windshields are designed to resist most impacts, they are not up to surviving a collision with high-speed debris travelling at orbital velocities. Another possible candidate is a weather balloon, as these do fly at similar heights to aircraft and carry small instrument packages with sand ballast, which would have been capable of shattering a windshield if struck by a plane travelling at cruising speed, but there were no reports of weather balloons being released in the area on 16 Oct, *aviationa2z.com, 18 Oct; theweathernetwork.com, 19 Oct 2025.*

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

LEFT: Damage to a United Airlines 737, and to the pilot's arm, may have been caused by a meteorite. **BELOW LEFT**: Did a piece of Starlink space debris smash this Tesla's windscreen? **BELOW RIGHT**: Scott Harris holds up the meteorite chunk that smashed through an Atlanta roof.

FROM OUTER SPACE

There is no doubt that the object that exploded over McDonough, Georgia, was a meteorite; hundreds of people reported the fireball and heard a loud booming noise as it disintegrated. For one unnamed homeowner in Atlanta, the sound was louder than for most, as a chunk of meteorite the size of a cherry tomato smashed through his roof and left a dent in the living room floor. "I suspect that he heard three simultaneous things," said Scott Harris, a researcher in the department of geology at the University of Georgia. "One was the collision with his roof, one was a tiny cone of a sonic boom and a third was it impacting the floor all in the same moment… There was enough energy when it hit the floor that it pulverized part of the material down to literal dust fragments." Harris retrieved 50g (1.8oz) of meteorite dust from the house, enabling him to identify it as coming from the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter and being made up of material that is older than the Earth. *theregister.com, 13 Aug 2025.*

IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE

Is extrasolar object 3I/ATLAS an unusual comet or an alien craft?

The comet dubbed 3I/ATLAS, a rare extrasolar intruder, continues to barrel through the Solar System, attracting interest and speculation from astronomers and space scientists worldwide. Harvard astronomer Avi Loeb, who controversially published a paper speculating on the possibility that the object is an artificial craft, continues to share his headline-grabbing thoughts about 3I/ATLAS. In August, he teamed up with appropriately named congresswoman Anna Paula Luna to call for NASA to closely monitor 3I/ATLAS and to divert both the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter and Jupiter's Juno probe to inspect it. They said they feared that if the object is alien technology, "it could either visit us or release some mini probes that arrive to Earth and appear as UAP," adding, "We need to be aware of that possibility." While NASA did not divert Juno, the European Space Agency (ESA) did have their Juice spacecraft, on the way to explore Jupiter and its moons, track 3I/ATLAS.

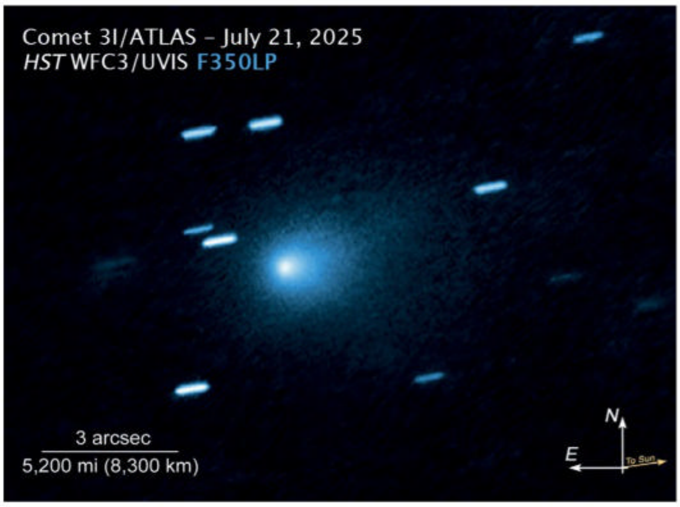
Loeb believes that Hubble Space Telescope observations which show a "glow of light, likely from a comet, ahead of the motion of 3I/ATLAS towards the Sun" bolster his claim that it is alien technology. Most scientists take this to be evidence that dust is evaporating from the object's Sun-facing side, but Loeb and colleagues suggest that the "simplest interpretation" of 3I/ATLAS's observed "steep brightness profile" is that its nucleus "produces most of the light". Loeb believes there are two ways in which this could come about: either 3I/ATLAS is naturally emitting radiation because it is a "rare fragment from the core of a nearby supernova that is rich in radioactive material", or it is a "spacecraft powered by nuclear energy, and the dust emitted from its frontal surface might be from dirt that accumulated on its surface during its interstellar travel".

As with his previous imaginative speculations, Loeb added caveats, saying that the first explanation is "highly unlikely" and that the second requires "better evidence to be viable", but complained that it was difficult to get the necessary evidence to tell what was going on with 3I/ATLAS because photos taken by Government agencies like NASA were not being processed and distributed. This was due to the Government shutdown, which had been caused by a budget standoff in Washington, but Loeb said that even when NASA was working at full capacity, it was still "sharing data slowly and selectively", implying this was deliberate. Others have gone further, suggesting this is evidence of a conspiracy to conceal evidence that 3I/ATLAS is an alien craft.

Loeb also feels that 3I/ATLAS's size and speed is suspicious. With a nucleus about 46km (26.5 miles) across and a mass of over 33 billion tons, it is far larger than a typical comet, and it is also traveling at 200,000 km/h (186,400 mph), which Loeb says is "virtually physically impossible" for a natural object of this size. He said a crucial test of whether it was a natural object or not would be when it passed behind the Sun on 29 October. So far, 3I/ATLAS has followed a completely natural hyperbolic orbit and shows no signs of steering, but, Loeb says, "If it's a technological object, that's the best time for it to do a manœuvre to take advantage of the Sun's gravity. That's what we do with our own spacecraft, so the question is, will it appear on a different path after passing close to the Sun? The problem is, we can't observe it from Earth because it's on the opposite side of the Sun. So when you look at the Sun during the daytime right now, 3I/ATLAS is flying behind it – perhaps for a reason," cryptically adding that we should perhaps "take a vacation before October 29th."

3I/ATLAS will remain obscured by the Sun for several weeks, so it will not be possible to see if it has changed its trajectory by using the gravitational slingshot effect until December. If it doesn't, Loeb has hedged his bets, saying "If it continues along its original path, it could still be that it releases some probes that go to the various planets, and manœuvres. So we should keep our eyes on this ball of light to figure out if it's natural or technological." NASA, though, in its official statement, reiterated that 3I/ATLAS is a purely natural object that poses no threat to Earth and that its orbit will pass within a safe distance.

In the meantime, Loeb has given 3I/ATLAS a score of 4 out of 10 on his own "Loeb Scale" designed to estimate the likelihood that an object is an alien craft, a score that indicates what he terms "increasing anomalous features", but still ultimately admits that 3I/Atlas "is most likely a comet". *futurism.com, 18 Aug; nypost.com, 5 Sept; capitaldailynews.com, livenowfox.com, 9 Oct 2025.*



LEFT: Hubble captured this image of 3I/ATLAS on 21 July, when it was 277 million miles from Earth. A teardrop-shaped cocoon of dust can be seen coming off its solid nucleus.

NASA, ESA, DAVID JEWITT (UCLA)

AVI LOEB'S LIST OF 3I/ATLAS ANOMALIES

1 This object is moving retrograde – the opposite way to most things orbiting the Sun – yet its path matches the planets' plane within just five degrees. That kind of alignment should happen only once in about 500 chances. Coincidence, or choreography?

2 In July and August 2025, observers saw a peculiar 'anti-tail' – a jet of gas shooting *toward* the Sun and unlike previous anti-tail sightings, it was not an optical illusion.

3 Its solid core is a million times more massive than 'Oumuamua and 1,000 times heavier than Borisov, yet it streaks through space even faster. The odds of such an extreme combination are estimated at less than one in 1,000.

4 Its flight path brought it unnervingly close to Mars, Venus, and Jupiter – and yet, right at its nearest point to the Sun, it was perfectly placed to be invisible from Earth. The likelihood of that bit of celestial timing? About one in 20,000.

5 Spectra show the gas cloud around it is rich in nickel but poor in iron – the kind of mix found in human-made nickel alloys, not natural comets. Its nickel-to-cyanide ratio is off the charts, another near-impossible signature.

6 Just 4% water by mass, when normal comets are mostly made of ice.

7 It reflects light in an unnaturally negative polarisation, something astronomers have never recorded in any comet. Whatever coats its surface is like nothing in our Solar System.

8 It entered the Solar System from nearly the same spot in the sky as the "Wow! Signal" — that mysterious radio burst from 1977 — within 9 degrees.

9 As it neared the Sun, it brightened faster than any known comet and turned bluer than sunlight itself. In fact, its colour changes – from green to blue to red – have baffled scientists.

CHRISTOPHER MICHEL / CREATIVE COMMONS

The Warminster 'Thing' at 60

NIGEL WATSON revisits Warminster to celebrate the events that made it a UFO pilgrimage site

PHOTOS: NIGEL WATSON

ABOVE LEFT: Conference host Stuart Dike. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Back row left to right: John Hanson, Stuart Dike, Steve Willis, Steve Maybury, Steve Rider. Front row left to right: Shirley Edwards, Sharon Mason, Maria Wheatley, Busty Taylor. **BELOW**: 23-year-old Gordon Faulkner holding the camera with which he took his famnous photo of 'The Thing' flying over his Warminster garden.

Starting on Christmas morning of 1964, residents in and around Warminster in Wiltshire heard a loud noise in the sky that they described as being like a loud clatter or crackling associated with a humming or droning sound.

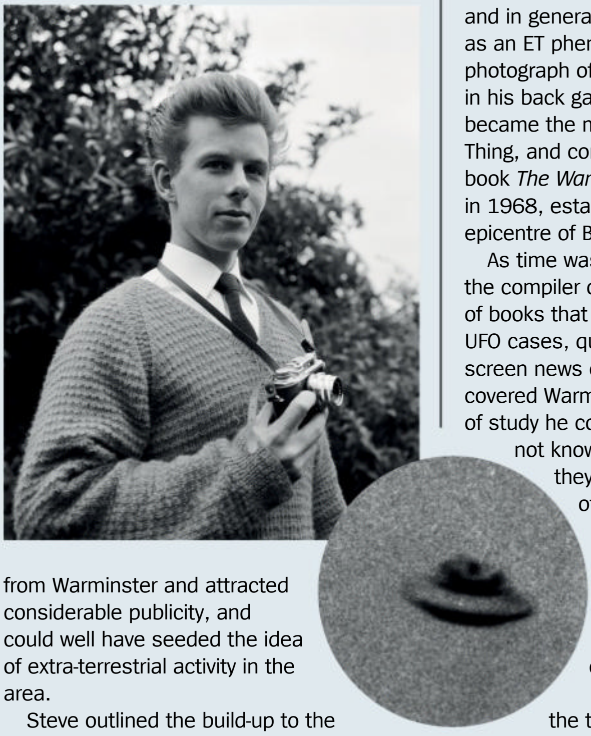
By Summer 1965 they were linked to numerous UFO sightings in the area and at Warminster Town Hall on the August Bank Holiday a public meeting about these claims brought it to national attention. As a consequence thousands of people came to Warminster to see what was called "The Thing" (**FT76:10, 312:24, 331:40-47, 332:28, 334:71, 339:69-70**)

In 1972 I made the pilgrimage to Warminster, and even then The Thing seemed to have deserted the famous Cradle Hill where most people gathered to swap stories and look with hope and expectation at the skies.

Fittingly Warminster's 60th Anniversary Conference sought to celebrate the events that put this small, quiet market town on the ufological map. Wearing a tin foil hat, Stuart Dike introduced and hosted the event at Warminster's Athenaeum theatre on Bank Holiday Sunday, 24 August 2025.

Stuart outlined the current US interest in UAPs, the drone scares that occurred in the US and UK at the end of last year and the 3I/Atlas interstellar object that is the current media star of ufology (see p.27).

Gordon Faulkner's photograph became the most important image of The Thing



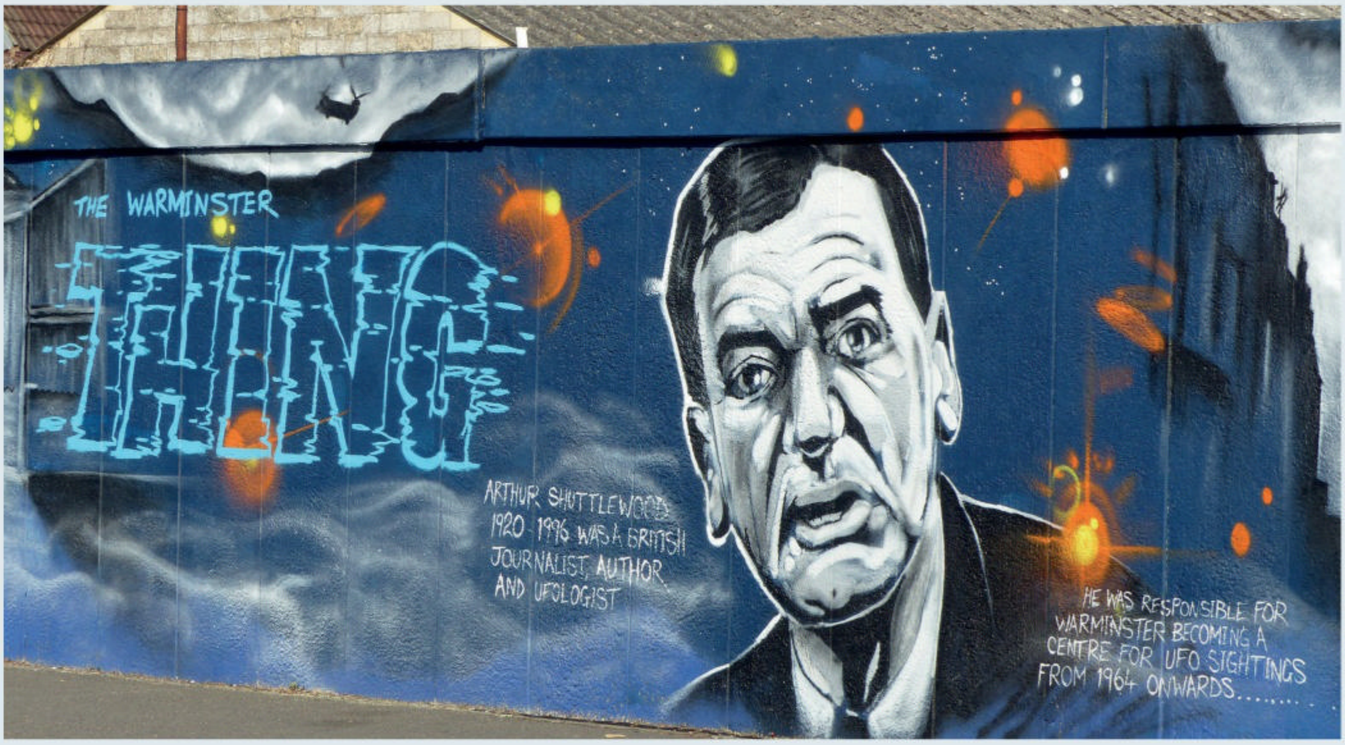
TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Steve Wills followed this with an introduction to Warminster's Thing, with accounts of sightings before the events of 1965, including the Charlton Crater case of July 1963. The sudden appearance of this crater at Manor Farm was only a few miles from Warminster and attracted considerable publicity, and could well have seeded the idea of extra-terrestrial activity in the area.

Steve outlined the build-up to the famous Town Hall meeting and how local journalist Arthur Shuttlewood became an important figure at Cradle Hill sky-watches and in generating publicity for The Thing as an ET phenomenon. Gordon Faulkner's photograph of a classic flying saucer taken in his back garden in September 1965, became the most important image of The Thing, and combined with Shuttlewood's book *The Warminster Mystery*, published in 1968, established Warminster as the epicentre of British ufology.

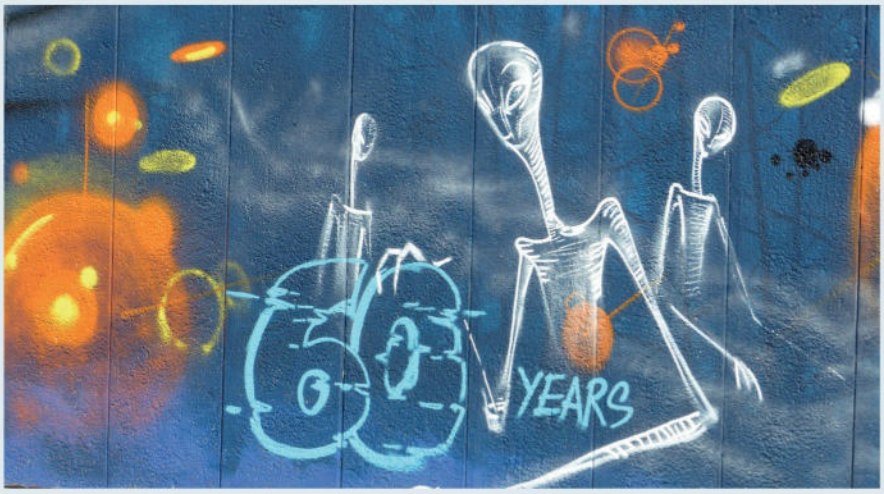
As time was running out John Hanson, the compiler of *The Haunted Skies* series of books that chronicle the history of British UFO cases, quickly illustrated on the big screen news clippings and reports that covered Warminster and beyond. After years of study he conceded that he still does not know what the UFOs are or where they come from, yet hundreds of people keep seeing them. Rather than laughing at people or frightening them, he contends that we need to get the message out there that this is something worthy of study.

Having covered the history of the topic, the next two speakers recalled their own UFO experiences. Steve Rider, who helped found the Southampton UFO Group, spoke about the


THE WARMINSTER
THING
ARTHUR SHUTTLEWOOD 1920-1996 WAS A BRITISH JOURNALIST, AUTHOR AND UFOLOGIST
HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR WARMINSTER BECOMING A CENTRE FOR UFO SIGHTINGS FROM 1964 ONWARDS........

ABOVE AND RIGHT: Details from the new 60th anniversary mural showing Arthur Shuttlewood, aliens and lights in the Warminster skies.

PHOTOS: NIGEL WATSON



influence of Warminster on his own UFO interests and research. He detailed his own sightings in Southampton, which included a light circled by a police helicopter, and a sighting by his grandmother.

Busty Taylor, of crop circle fame, spoke about his sightings of UFOs since his childhood in Wiltshire. He noted that they can quickly move in any direction and easily avoid being tracked by radar. He ventured no opinion as to what they are or where they come from.

After the lunch break there was a short video about the rock band C.E. IV that since the 1990s has produced UFO and alien abduction inspired music, including the 2009 song "Cradle Hill (Come Touch The Sky)", now available in a remastered version (https://ceiv.band/track/4324182/cradle-hill-come-touch-the-sky-remaster-2025).

Earth energy expert and master dowser Maria Wheatley followed with an impressive and passionate review of the folklore, legends and history of the Warminster area. She emphasised how invisible leys align with ancient mounds and sites, and form networks of energy. Maria also referenced the works of antiquarian John Aubrey, occultist John Dee, and Aleistair Crowley's conjuring of the alien-like LAM entity in 1919. She also recalled the legend of a guardian spirit living in a barrow on the top of Cley Hill who directed water underground to Hog's Well where it was claimed to cure bad eyes – and, according to Maria, open our third eye. Cley Hill was also claimed to be the hiding place of an alien beacon that directs UFOs to the Warminster district.

Stuart Dike returned to talk about 'higher self' questions answered under hypnosis. He claimed that hypnosis puts us in touch with our "over-self" and with our shared ancient Akashic Records – the spiritual database of every human being's thoughts, emotions and experiences since time began. A video showing Stuart under hypnosis, conducted by Quantum Healing Hypnosis practitioner Sharon Mason, has him recalling the Warminster phenomenon, and elaborating that the beings are interdimensional and travel in solid craft. As they are from other realms they can be unsettling especially since they can shape-shift. They are also linked to a grid system of Earth energies created thousands of years ago.

Finally, there was a Q&A session with the speakers and plenty of the 100 people in the audience were keen to talk about their own sightings, comment about UFO theories or ask questions about the nature of UFOs. The positive and negative aspects of a UFO experience were discussed, and how UFOs work on different levels of reality and operate in different timelines. Steve Maybury gave a particularly moving account of his close encounter, which had a powerful psychological impact on him. Surprisingly, there were no direct questions about why Warminster was the centre of all this UFO and paranormal activity; and not unsurprisingly, no sceptical voices were heard.

Warminster has never been a place to show-off its UFO status or even cash-in on its infamy, but the Heart of Warminster community group, through crowdfunding, has recently raised £1,000 for artist Paul Boswell to create a 20-metre (65ft) long mural featuring Arthur Shuttlewood, aliens and UFOs on a wall at the central car park. The spray painted artwork covers an older, and less-well executed, UFO mural produced to celebrate 50 years of The Thing.

Given the demographics of the conference attendees, one wonders if the pilgrimages to Cradle Hill will dwindle and die, and if a mural tucked away in an unremarkable car park will be enough to keep The Thing alive for future generations...

The South Shields Poltergeist 20 Years On

December 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the onset of one of the best attested cases of a poltergeist outbreak on record. It has been described as "one of the most violent outbreaks in British poltergeist history", and the events that occurred left all that witnessed them shocked, bewildered and traumatised. Twenty years on, **DARREN W RITSON** reflects on his investigation of the South Shields Poltergeist.

LEFT: South Shields, South Tyneside.

PAUL THOMPSON IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

MONDAY 17 JULY, 2006...

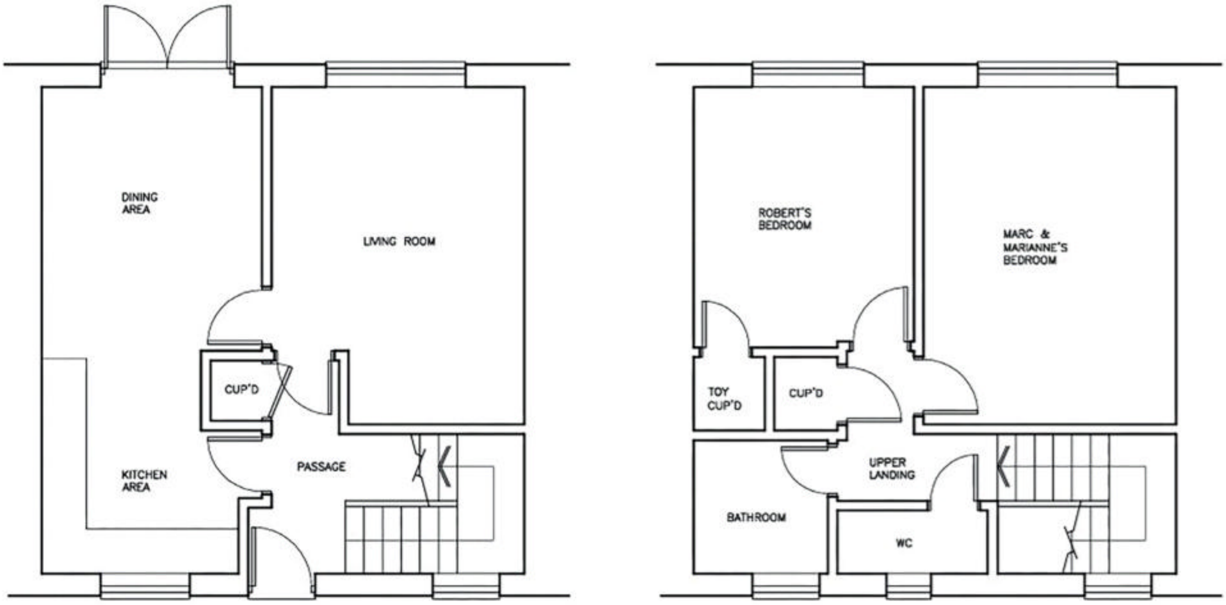
It was a hot day in one of the hottest and most uncomfortable summers of recent years. I was standing in a small upstairs bedroom of a house on the outskirts of a modern estate in the borough of South Tyneside in the north east of England with my colleague Michael J Hallowell and homeowners Marc Karlsonn* and Marianne Peterworth*.[1]

We watched Marc and Marianne carefully as we waited for something, anything, to happen. Marc whispered: "A lot of stuff happens in here." I bent over to check my camera was recording; it was. Michael still had his eyes fixed firmly on Marc and Marianne, and then suddenly, without warning, something *did* happen: a small yellow plastic nut that was resting on the toy workbench in the bedroom of Marianne's son Robert* launched itself across the room. A split second later we all heard a loud 'crack' followed by a louder yelp. The nut had shot across the room and ricocheted off a recessed wooden door that Marianne was standing in front of, and hit her hard. She grabbed her right buttock and screamed, "Ow! God! Did you see that? It hit my hip!" At the same time, something then hit the floor behind her. There, in full view, was the yellow plastic nut that had been resting on the junior workbench only seconds before.

Marianne looked shocked and scared. Marc looked confused. Mike and I, on the contrary, were ecstatic. We apologised to Marc and Marianne and explained why we were so happy: nothing pleases investigators more than when they witness paranormal activity at first hand. From our perspective, we had observed what we considered to be a genuine poltergeist event. This led us to believe that something was indeed going on in the house, and we were not the victims of a prank. Although fraud was at the forefront of our minds, we could not work out how this trick could have been pulled off by the couple; they were after all, standing at the other end of the room from where the toy nut had been located.

> We had witnessed what we considered to be a genuine poltergeist event

A number of other things happened that day. A pencil eraser threw itself to the floor. A little orange ball suddenly and mysteriously appeared on the bed between Marc and Marianne after they had sat down on it; it had not been there previously, nor had they put it there. Seconds later they stood shaking in the middle of the room, staring at the bed and the materialised orange ball, which was hot to the touch: they were clearly terrified. The yellow nut that had hit Marianne on the hip earlier on, which had been subsequently picked up by Marc and placed on a chest of drawers, flew off and landed in a nearby cardboard box, and a toy that was resting firmly on a surface slid off as though pushed by an unseen hand and landed in an empty tin wastebasket with a clatter. This litany of strange events, and the ensuing excitement and pandemonium, was all recorded on video camera and bears witness to some of what happened that day.



DARREN W RITSON

ABOVE: A floor plan of the family's Lock Street house, with the ground floor shown at left and the first floor at right. **BELOW:** Investigators Michael J Hallowell (left) and Darren W Ritson (right) at the time of the South Shields events.

This was our first visit to the house, and it was the beginning of something that would change our lives forever. However, it was not the beginning for Marc and Marianne; they had been enduring the strange activity in their home for some months – poltergeist activity, witnessed by numerous family members and friends, which had left them terrified and bewildered in equal measure. Let us rewind to the onset of the paranormal activity at Lock Street*, South Shields, which began in December 2005, 20 years ago this month. The South Shields poltergeist was about to burst forth.

BEGINNINGS

It started with odd occurrences that made both Marc and Marianne suspect each other of being clumsy or forgetful. One of the first was finding the shower turned on when no one was using it; they each assumed that the other had accidentally left it running – however, it had not been used that day and each denied responsibility for it. They soon forgot about it. Other minor happenings were noted; objects were found in places where they should not be, closed doors were found open, and belongings went missing only to turn up later in unusual places. Again, both Marc and Marianne denied responsibility for these events. After a while, and after much heated accusation, things became a little more unnerving. Loud knocking and rapping was heard inside the house, leading them to suspect that someone – possibly an intruder – might actually be in there with them. No one was ever discovered. Then, things got genuinely frightening when Marianne's son Robert began to talk about seeing and speaking to a 'lady' in the house; furthermore, he insisted that a young boy called Sammy would often appear and play with him in his room.

DARREN W RITSON

Robert began to talk about seeing and speaking to a 'lady' in the house

This, on top of the missing belongings, opening doors, and unexplained banging, led Marc and Marianne to suspect they might have a ghost. Not knowing what to do, they simply had to put up with it. Marianne confided in her mother, June*, who dismissed the whole thing as the product of an overactive imagination – until she began to experience the odd happenings for herself. For example, June had been with Robert in his bedroom while he was getting ready for bed. She was there for around 10 minutes before they came downstairs so the boy could eat his supper. Afterwards, they went back upstairs only to discover the chair in Robert's room had disappeared; June had seen it there only 10 minutes before. She then noticed that the door to Marianne's bedroom was now open, when earlier it had been firmly closed. When she peered into the room, she was astonished to see Robert's chair there; it had somehow been relocated from his bedroom while they were downstairs. June was now having second thoughts about Marianne's 'ghost'; and that, as you can imagine, frightened her.

Other family members visiting the house also began to experience strange things. Marianne was standing chatting to her father one day when a cup on the workbench slid across it and fell into the bin next to Marianne. It was taken out and placed back on the bench; seconds later, the same thing happened again. Another incident witnessed by Marianne and her father, again involving a drinking vessel, left them dumbfounded. Standing at the back door chatting they were shocked to see a cup fall in front of them from above and smash to smithereens on the ground below. Marianne categorically stated that the cup had been in Robert's bedroom earlier, but when they looked up to his bedroom window, it was securely locked; furthermore, the blinds were down. The cup had somehow travelled outside *through* the closed window, before crashing to the ground. This is known as matter-through-matter penetration – when a solid object travels through another solid object without breaking it. It has been documented in other poltergeist cases, and it wasn't the only example of it happening in here; in fact, it was documented and witnessed on numerous occasions. I may have been inclined to treat this unbelievable event with some scepticism had I, and others present at the time, not seen for ourselves a 20p piece travel *through* a closed glass panelled door and come to land on the floor with a clatter in another room.

Now it wasn't just Marc and Marianne experiencing these strange events, but Marianne's mother, father, and young Robert as well – and it was only going to get worse.

LOOKING FOR HELP

Over the following months many other harrowing incidents took place. Seeking help, Marianne visited both a Spiritualist church and a priest, although neither she nor Marc was religious. A blessing carried out in the house by the local priest had very little effect; the activity ceased only for a very short while, as is normally the case, before it started up again. This brief respite obviously did the family some good, but stress levels and fear increased with the poltergeist's inevitable reappearance. The Spiritualists didn't provide much assistance either. They claimed the house was full of spirits "from the bowels of Hell" and left soon after, saying that they could not help. The demonic entities, they said, would leave only when they wanted to. This left Marc and Marianne more fragile and frightened than before.

The activity continued: a vase on the stair landing windowsill kept moving from one side to the other; coats that were hung up in the hallway were forever being tossed up the stairs; ornaments were found moved and out of place; and, harrowingly, a voice was heard over the child monitor in Robert's room telling Robert he was "going to fall out of bed". Even more chillingly, the boy's toy rocking horse was turned upside down on a number of occasions, and was often moved around the house. Eventually it was found hanging from the loft hatch by its reins; at this point it was put outside due to the fear it was creating. You can imagine the family's horror when they got up one morning to find the rocking horse was back inside the house.

DARREN W RITSON

Marianne and June had heard of my work in the paranormal field, and reached out to me. June told me in her initial email what had been going on, and what she had seen for herself at her daughters' home, but suggested that I was better off talking to Marianne. I was given her telephone number and made contact.

All I could do at this point was to offer assistance, and be supportive. I told her she could call me at any time, night or day, if she or her family felt threatened; and she did, numerous times. In each phone call she reported the latest frightening activity, and each time it appeared to be getting worse. I could hear the fear in her voice, and on occasion she wept down the line. Based on what she told me, I suspected that she had an active poltergeist in her home. I believed she was being sincere in her reporting of events, but I needed to know for sure.

I didn't have to wait long; the activity was getting worse by the day and soon Marianne was imploring me to visit her home.

On that first visit in July 2006 I brought my good friend Michael J Hallowell to help evaluate the situation. On our way to the house we reviewed the case notes that had been made, and discussed the reported activity. Although I felt Marianne was being truthful in her recounting of events, we had a slight suspicion that misinterpretation or misunderstanding might be at work here; the whole thing seemed to be just too 'good' to be true. But it turned out to be all too real, and we got to see at first-hand what we later called the 'South Shields poltergeist' at work.

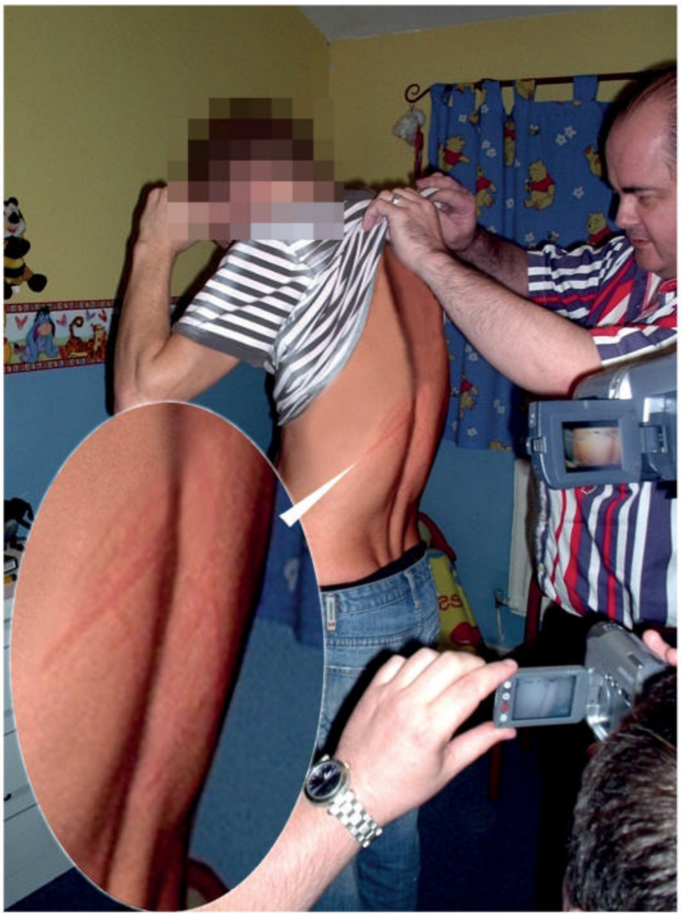
After that first day at the house, the day that changed our lives forever, we knew we had a live case on our hands. However, as the activity had started in the previous December, and poltergeists are normally short lived, we thought this one would most probably burn itself fairly soon; which is what we kept telling the family in the hope that it would reassure them – which it did to a certain extent. However, I have no shame in admitting that we were wrong: the South Shields poltergeist was just warming up.

THE POLT TURNS VIOLENT

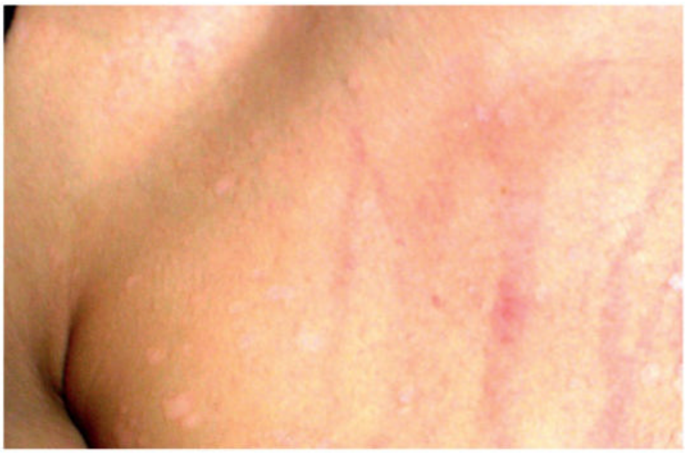
Over the coming months the poltergeist took a firm grip on the family, and on us – and it would not relent. It had no problem dem-

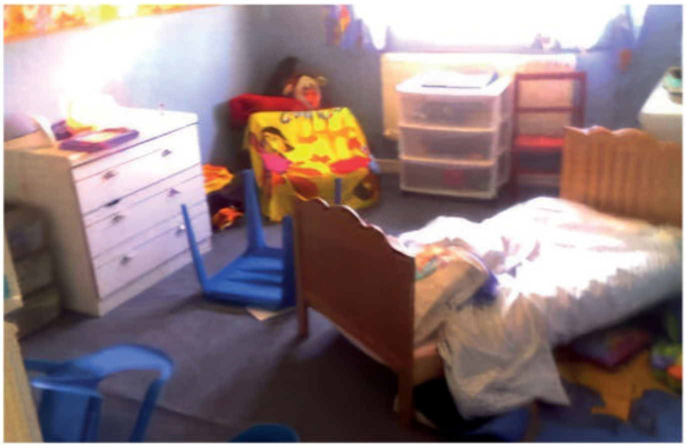
DARREN W RITSON

TOP: Darren W Ritson sitting on Robert's bed with the mysterious apporting ball. **ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT:** One of the entity's favourite, and less threatening, tricks was to move everyday objects from their usual positions.



DARREN W RITSON





ABOVE LEFT: Michael and Darren recording the scratch marks on Marc's back. **TOP RIGHT:** More scratches appeared on Marc's chest and were filmed and photographed. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Chaotic scenes in Robert's bedroom, which had been perfectly tidy just 10 minutes earlier.

onstrating its abilities when it came to the crunch, and one example of this involves what has been termed the 'bottle balance' footage.

There is a still image taken from a film clip of this, which has proved to be the most talked about photograph of the case. The image shows a mineral water bottle standing on edge, balancing in a most unnatural position; how it got there is what makes the photo so controversial.

This event happened around 3.30am on Saturday 26 August 2006 after an eventful few hours. Michael had received a text from Marianne the night before at 11.36, but had missed it. A few moments later, at 11.40, she called him. She frantically explained that they needed help, desperately, because the poltergeist had now attacked Marc. He had been lying in bed when suddenly he felt his torso begin to burn. He removed his T-shirt so Marianne could take a look, and she discovered a number of scratches; not many, just one or two. Then she noticed a few more that she had missed at first glance. Marc then saw even more appearing on the side of his body. "Marianne, I am burning… look at these marks… what's happening to me?" he asked frantically. "I don't know, but this is crazy… I am going to call Mike", said Marianne.

Michael soon arrived and attempted to calm the situation before asking to see the marks. He counted at least 13 separate scratches. After filming them and taking a number of pictures he was told about a very strange incident that had occurred just prior to his arrival.

Marc had suggested to Marianne that they pay for Michael's taxi after dragging him out at such a late hour. As Marc uttered these words, a crumpled up £10 note flew across from the empty kitchen area and landed next to Marianne. It was as though the poltergeist was listening in and saying, "Here's his taxi money". (Michael, for the record, did not accept any payment to cover his fare.)

Michael checked the house. When he went upstairs, Marc and Marianne opted to remain below. Michael had a look around, and gave the all-clear before the frightened couple reluctantly made their way up. Robert, at this point, was sleeping downstairs on the sofa. All seemed well, everything was in its rightful place, and there were no signs of any unusual activity – until they opened Robert's bedroom door; the room, tidy only minutes before, had been completely trashed. The bed was in the middle of the room, and toys and other items of furniture were strewn about everywhere. Visibly destressed, Marianne followed Michael into the bedroom. "Woah! Oh God!" she exclaimed. "Everything's moved… *everything*!"

Michael had had the good sense to turn on his recording device, so this was all documented as it happened. It was to get worse, with various examples of poltergeist activity being observed: cupboard doors swinging open violently, the light in the master bedroom swaying back and forth, a towel launching itself off the towel rail to land in the middle of the floor, a plastic table being bent and twisted out of shape, and a host of other disturbing and bewildering occurrences.

Then the poltergeist turned its attention to Marc once more. It attacked him for the second time that night, and Michael was there to witness it and capture it all on film. In fact, the poltergeist went on to physically attack Marc on three further occasions during the course of its stay, leaving angry looking cuts and welts that burned and bled each time. These latter attacks were caught on numerous video cameras and witnessed by at least a dozen people.

It was now around 3.30am, and it was at this point that the bottle of mineral water Michael had brought with him to drink did something very strange.

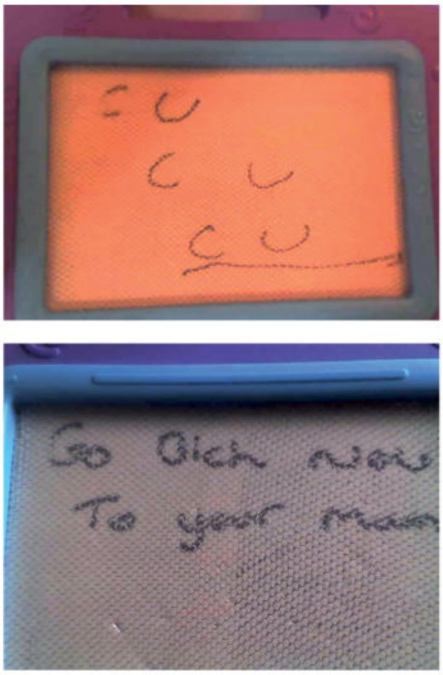
Michael had briefly closed his eyes to rest after the night's activities. He was sitting at the kitchen table, and felt as though the room had filled with static electricity. His skin started to tingle, and the hairs on his arms and neck stood up… he could sense something was amiss. He opened his eyes and glanced around, and it was then he saw the bottle of water standing "tipped sharply on its edge". He hurriedly removed his camera from his bag, and proceeded to take some film footage. After a short while, he shook the table to see if the bottle would fall; it didn't. Then he prodded the bottle with his finger; it still stood fast. After another push with his finger, the bottle finally tipped over.

MALIGN MESSAGES

As well as performing the usual array of tricks you'd expect from a poltergeist, the South Shields entity had up its sleeve another more sinister tactic to scare the family to distraction: incoming voice messages on the telephone and in mobile phone texts. Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s poltergeists seemed to be adapting to modern technology; previously, they had been known to attempt communication by scribbling messages on walls, floors, pieces of paper, and, in one case in the 1980s, on a basic school computer.[2] At this point, the South Shields entity had already left messages for the family – and for us – such as "GIVE IT A CHANCE", "CU,CU,CU", "BAD DOG", and more ominously, "DIE", on a toy doodle board (similar to an old Etch-a-Sketch) that had belonged to Robert. However, it soon figured out a new way to create abject terror in its victims.

The first of the messages came through on Friday 25 August 2006 when Michael and I, along with a friend named Jill Butler, were all present to witness them. At first, during the course of the morning, the landline would ring, but go dead upon being picked up. Then, Marianne began to receive strange voicemails. Although the messages seemed to be emanating from Marc's mobile phone, it was not Marc that was sending them. We established this by dismantling his phone, removing the battery and SIM card, and watching in amazement as more calls and messages continued to come in. Somehow, the messages being sent were typed in, subsequently converted, and then relayed to the listener in an electronic mechanical voice. Meaningless messages were received, such as "*Hello, Hello*", "*Hi Hi Hi Hi Hi Hi*", and then "*Sorry*". In the coming days further messages would arrive; but they would be a lot more threatening and intimidating in nature.

DARREN W RITSON



LEFT: Two of the numerous, often threatening, messages that appeared on a toy doodle board. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The much-discussed photograph of a bottle of mineral water "topped sharply on its edge". **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Darren mounting a vigil in Robert's bedroom.

> Another message: "please donwt gow now, i will just come with you bich"

At 6.05pm on Monday 28 August 2006, Marianne's phone beeped. It was another message from Marc's mobile phone, which was sitting on the table and was switched off. Marianne picked up her phone and looked at the message. It read *"get you bich"*. A little perturbed, Marc, in an attempt to stop any more messages, picked up his phone and removed the battery, but another message soon followed: *"you're dead"*. Later that day, with Michael present, more messages appeared. By this point, the phone's SIM card had been disconnected again, as it had been days earlier, and yet the messages still came. "*The bitch will die today*", followed by "*going to die today, going to get you*", arrived in quick succession at 6.30pm. By 6.40pm the entity had become bored of sending text messages and switched to automated voice messages instead, which it sent via the landline. Upon answering the phone, a chilling robotic voice simply said, "*the bitch will die today, bitch going to get you o.k mam.*"

Terrified, Marc, Marianne and Robert packed some belongings and left to stay with Marianne's mother, June; they did this quite often when things got too much for them at their home. Later that evening, Marianne called Michael to 'check in'. She sounded distressed, which in these circumstances, was quite normal. After receiving yet another text from the poltergeist stating "*tonight is the night you will die*" and that "*I will come for you when you're asleep*", she expressed concern that the entity might have followed them to her mother's house. "Please tell me that it hasn't come with me to my mum's. I couldn't stand it," she said. A second later, the phone beeped. Another message: "*please donwt gow now, I will just com with you bich.*" Marianne screamed, and said that she was too afraid to go to sleep. Within seconds, another text arrived: "*I cann get you when you awake and I'll come for you when you're asleep bich.*" The poltergeist, it seems, was listening in to every word they were saying; there was no escape.

Of course Marianne did not die at the hands of the South Shields poltergeist that night. I knew she wouldn't, and I made this clear to

DARREN W RITSON

Michael when he called me that afternoon to tell me about the incident. I told him it was just a string of empty threats from the poltergeist in an effort to scare its victims shitless; and it worked – they were petrified. Admittedly, during the texting and messaging phase of the South Shields case, I was left wondering just what we were dealing with; I stopped taking my own phone to the house, as I was genuinely concerned that it might start picking on me. The poltergeist ultimately did decide to have a go at us, following Michael and I home at times and demonstrating its ability to reach out and infect us with its malign influence (see **FT438:30-35**); it also did this to various other people involved in some way or another with the case. But that is another story.[3]

THE END

A full account of the 2005/2006 Lock Street affair and how it ultimately came to a head – much to the relief of Marc and Marianne – was documented in detail in our 2008 book about the case, which has since gone through a number of editions.[4]

But for the record, I shall briefly detail what happened and how it all came to a close. The end came after almost a year of incredible phenomena and horrendous torment. It came with the assistance of a colleague who had suggested to us that we get Marc and Marianne to turn off all their electrical appliances each night – hi-fi, TV sets, kettles, microwaves – and not leave them on stand-by, and to switch plugs off at the walls too. Our colleague believed that the latent electricity supply left over in such devices was enough to perhaps 'recharge' the poltergeist and potentially sustain it. This, we thought, made some sense, as one (admittedly unproven) theory suggests that poltergeists can draw their energy from an electricity supply. We believed, and still do, that *fear* is another, or perhaps their primary source of 'fuel'; it's another unproven theory, but after enduring the entity for so long, Marc and Marianne – as hard as this is to believe – simply became bored with it, to the point where it mostly induced feelings of utter tedium. The poltergeist, perhaps nearing its end, could no longer induce the fear it needed to continue. We speculated that as an alternative source, perhaps in desperation, it had turned to electricity – latent 'stand-by' electricity.

Surprisingly, after Marc and Marianne tried turning off their power at night and unplugging their appliances, the activity at 42 Lock Street tailed off almost to the point of non-existence, and for a full month nothing happened at all. But an outburst of poltergeist activity did take place at a local care home where both Marc and Marianne worked and was witnessed by many staff members. Had the entity, 'starved' of its energy source, followed them to their place of work? Answers on a postcard…

This respite only lasted for a month. The poltergeist wreaked havoc again for one more week before ceasing its activities and vanishing without a trace, as suddenly as it had appeared. The 'stand-by' power source idea: was it just a coincidence, or had we hit on something? We will never know. In retrospect, I think that perhaps after almost one year of infesting, terrorising, throwing furniture around, texting people and committing vicious assaults, perhaps the entity just ran out of steam. I had said this would happen in my first telephone call to Marianne at the very beginning.… but did we help it along?

The end came after a year of incredible phenomena and horrendous torment

ABOVE: Toy trouble – the entity often moved or interfered with Robert's playthings.

DARREN W RITSON

AFTERMATH

After our book was published the case became widely known within the field of psychical research as one of the best attested and most violent outbreaks of the last 50 years, sitting alongside other notable cases such as the Runcorn Poltergeist (1952; see **FT358:33**), Hannath Hall (1957; see **FT462:16-18**), 30 East Drive, Pontefract (1966-69; see **FT293:28-37**), Germany's Rosenheim Poltergeist (1969; see **FT356:18-20**), the Miami Poltergeist (1972; see **FT356:18-20**), the Andover Poltergeist (1974) and the Enfield Poltergeist (1977-78; see **FT32:47, 33:04, 166:39, 288:18, 293:37, 299:14- 15, 329:51**).

That was 20 years ago, and to my knowledge, nothing quite like this has been recorded and published since. Despite this, the case is not so familiar to the wider public. Although it has been documented in many books (of varying quality), online pieces, YouTube 'top tens', podcasts and magazines, it has never really received the attention that it arguably warrants. Some of this may be a result of my refusal to take part in TV programmes about the case. Over the years, I have received dozens of offers – from Netflix to the BBC, from ITV to The Discovery Channel – but I stand by my decision. The film footage the TV companies always request could compromise the anonymity of the family concerned; not only that, but TV producers often insist on knowing who the family are so they can involve them. I made a promise almost 20 years ago that I would never reveal their identities to anyone, under any circumstances, and to this day I have remained true to that promise, and to this day they still live under their own requested cloak of anonymity. This has of course, led to many accusations that we don't have any actual footage or evidence; indeed, some people have doubted the existence of Marc and Marianne and have suggested the entire account is a fabrication; but I can live with that, as for me it's a case of ethics over entertainment.

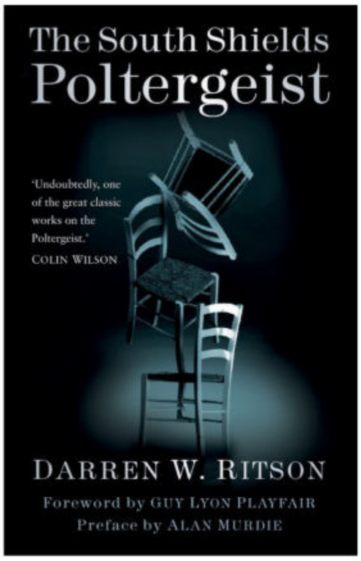
For me, the case is now known in the circles where it actually matters; within the academic parapsychological communities and universities, and the leading research associations such as the Society for Psychical Research. These are institutions where our accumulated data can be – and has been – studied, evaluated and published in peer-reviewed literature. Indeed, in 2022, a paper studying certain dynamics and features of the South Shields case, along with gathered evidence that was submitted for scrutiny, was published.[5] Prior to that, a journal review of the book and case was published by Alan Murdie in 2010.[6] Other peer-reviewed papers, case reviews and references to the event have featured in publications such as the *Journal of Parapsychology*, *Frontiers*, and the *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*. The most recent well-refer-

DARREN W RITSON

LEFT: Darren W Ritson (left) and Michael J Hallowell, whose lives were changed forever by their investigation of the South Shields poltergeist. **BELOW LEFT:** The most recent edition of Darren's 2008 book on the case.

enced work regarding the case appeared in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* in 2024.[7] Having my work scrutinised and subsequently endorsed by scientists and peer-reviewed authors, and making a small contribution to poltergeist research, is by far the greatest reward that I could hope for.

Twenty years on, I often find myself thinking about the case and asking myself questions such as "Did we really see that?" and "Did this incident actually occur?" But, in truth, yes… we did, and no one will ever convince me otherwise. I have to pinch myself at times when I think of just how many poltergeist phenomena we were witnesses to, and how fortunate I was to have been given the case in the first place. I remember feeling this way during the course of the investigation and at the end of 2006 when the entity had departed from Lock Street; and after 20 years of contemplation and consideration both Michael and I still stand firm on our belief that it *was* all very real.


The South Shields
Poltergeist
'Undoubtedly, one of the great classic works on the Poltergeist.'
COLIN WILSON
DARREN W. RITSON
Foreword by GUY LYON PLAYFAIR
Preface by ALAN MURDIE

The aftermath of the case, though, demonstrated it wasn't only the poltergeist that was capable of hostile acts; no, these came from other researchers, keyboard warriors, armchair investigators, and even from some of our so-called friends. It was essentially trolling, before the term was invented, and it was relentless, libellous and extremely stressful. Eighteen years ago, there was little protection against such persistent online harassment, so we simply had to endure it. Some of the worst of the unfounded and potentially damaging attacks on our characters, and our families, however, landed the accusers in very hot water after we took legal action. Over the years, all of this took its toll in various ways on both of us.

We had started out with nothing but good intentions and simply wanted to help the family, document the case, and tell the story of what happened. South Shields turned out to be a huge undertaking, though, and neither Mike nor I had ever handled anything on this scale before; all we could do was our best. We had no idea, however, what was coming as a consequence of this, and it hit us hard and head-on like a freight train.

Some of the criticisms levelled at us, I must add, were fair: why didn't we do this, or that? We were always open to questions in relation to our handling of the case, and with hindsight we admit there were things that we could have done differently, or done better. Some people asked pertinent questions and offered pointers and advice which were taken on board and learned from. Most, however, simply told us how incompetent we were, or how we lied and fabricated the entire affair.

Since investigating the case and the subsequent publication of the book, our lives have never really been the same. The repercussions from South Shields changed us in ways we never even contemplated, and it wasn't always positive. My health and my happiness suffered in certain respects, so you could say that what came after was a costly affair, and in more ways than one. On several occasions over the years I have wished the case had never come to me. However, to see the phenomena that we did at South Shields was indeed a blessing, if a strange one; but in the long term, it was also a curse.

Although the South Shields poltergeist itself is now long gone, it has been haunting me for 20 years; I am essentially living in its shadow. To investigate poltergeists, or to 'tell your story' if you ever have to deal with one, you are going to need thick skin, because you *will* be called a liar. How naïve I was when I asked the late Guy Lyon Playfair after only six months on the receiving end of the accusations: "Will it ever end?"

He looked at me and said: "Darren, it's been 30 years since Enfield and I still get it today."

Poltergeists are all too real, but people haven't woken up and accepted the fact. Most, I think, simply won't allow such 'superstitious nonsense' into their lives or their fixed worldview, despite the testimonies and the "similar fact evidence"[8] held in many archives. Perhaps they will wake up to it when one invades their own home and wreaks 'impossible' havoc right before their eyes. Or maybe not; we should remember that, also contrary to the evidence, there are people out there who still insist the Moon isn't real and the Earth is flat.

NOTES

[1] Names and places marked with an asterisk at their first appearance (*) are fictional and are pseudonyms. The anonymity of the family and the location of their home are of the utmost importance and are at the family's request.

[2] Ken Webster, *The Vertical Plane* (Collins, 1989, and Iris Publishing, 2021).

[3] Darren W Ritson, *Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion*, White Crow Books (2021)

[4] Darren W Ritson, *The South Shields Poltergeist: One Family's Fight Against an Invisible Intruder*, (The History Press, 2008, 2009, 2020)

[5] J Houran, B Laythe, C Little & DW Ritson, "Uncharted Features and Dynamics of the South Shields Poltergeist", *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 2022, Vol.86, No3, pp.129-164..

[6] Alan Murdie, "Review of The South Shields Poltergeist: One Family's Fight Against an Invisible Intruder", *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol.74, pp.129-132.

[7] Eric Dullin, "A Detailed Phenomenology of Poltergeist Events", *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 2024.

[8] A term coined by Alan Murdie, suggesting that if enough eye witness testimony is sufficient to convict a criminal in a court of law, then it should also apply in support the existence of the poltergeist.

DARREN W RITSON has been a member of the Society for Psychical Research since 2006, and to date, has written nearly 20 books on ghosts and poltergeists, including *The South Shields Poltergeist* (2008), *The Haunting of Willington Mill* (2011), *Ghosts at Christmas* (2011), *Ghost Taverns of the North East* (2009) and *Poltergeist Parallels and Contagion* (2021).

SAS VERSUS GNOMES

TRAVELIBUK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

BEN TIMBERLAKE explains how a soldier's hallucination in the Welsh woods led him to re-examine a theory that fungi might be behind our ghost stories, religious visions, and things that go bump in the night...

The SAS (Special Air Service) make routine use of sleep-deprivation exercises in their selection process, and these often feature in later training. Hallucinations during such exercises are very common, while acting upon them is frowned upon. One particular night we had been up for 48 hours marching around doing the most routine military crap imaginable, but not doing it very well, and as punishment we were made to stay out for another night in a patch of boggy ground deep in an ancient Welsh deciduous woodland. There were about two dozen of us, and we fanned out silently into a large defensive circle, each man was 20 metres from his colleague, each covering his own arc, rifles pointed out into the pitch-black night.

If you've never looked through an antiquated British Army night-vision scope, then all you've missed is green static. To the alert mind, it is a dull snow-globe the colour of mushy peas; to the terminally weary, it is a carnival of Rorschach cartoons.

I settled into watching my arc through my scope: it was a gentle hollow of ground, tangled with rotting tree fall and moss-clad stumps. Occasional breaks in the cloud gave the scene a passing glow and sharpened the definition. I remember that mouldy scent from my uniform and the bergen I was resting my rifle on, and that deep, primordial smell of the woodland floor – softly fungal, sharply tannin – the mulch of decay and life.

The first gnome appeared after five minutes, and in fairly high-definition. Writing this now, I am disappointed at how mundane my imagination can be. It was an industry-standard, garden-centre regular gnome: small, bearded, smock coat, Phrygian cap cocked forward. He stepped out from behind a tree stump and appeared to be pacing the ground at the bottom of the hollow, stomping on the earth here and there. I peered out beyond my scope, but it was too dark. Looking back through the lens I could see the gnome again. I watched. Soon he was joined by another who started to pace and stomp, preparing the ground. Then another. And slowly this pacing and stomping became a dance. Not anything elaborate, but a slow and uncoordinated folk dance.

I flicked the safety-catch off and lined up a shot. Don't judge me. Sure, it's wrong to blast otherworldly creatures, but they were in my arc of fire; it was a top-secret military training area, and besides, who hasn't wanted to shoot a Morris dancer? The red dot rested on his forehead; then I moved it down to the centre of his chest. And then I flicked the safety-catch back on. Off and on, in time to the silent music.

And then I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember is waking up to the glare of a torch and my sergeant screaming at me.

In the morning, we were allowed 15 minutes to brew-up, smoke cigarettes and re-apply camouflage face-paint. The lads were chatting and one said, "Did you see anything strange in the woods last night?" Each one had, but they had different names for them: forest folk, shadow people. Eventually, it was my turn, and I didn't want to say 'gnomes' so I said, "Yeah, like pixies and sprites and stuff." There was a brief silence before the abuse began. It felt a little unfair, as these men, whose emblem is essentially a fairy sword, paused putting on their make-up, to subject me to a withering barrage of homophobic insults.

That was a long time ago, but I clearly remember that night and that fungal smell. There is something bewitching about that scent; growth on decay, somewhere between life, death, and afterlife.

DAMP DARK HAUNTINGS

Previous research into the link between fungal presence and supernatural activity has tended to focus on haunted houses and finding direct hallucinogenic causality from a single, elusive source (see Alan Murdie, "Mouldy Old Ghosts", **FT329:16-18**). But I believe something more broadly neuroactive, subtle and complex is at play.

This isn't about debunking spiritual experiences. It's about understanding potential physical mechanisms that might contribute to them.

Broadly speaking, a great deal of para-

MATTHEW MEYER / YOKAI.COM

normal activity occurs in culturally suggestive environments which are also havens for moulds: old houses, ruined buildings, graveyards, crypts, caves. All these settings tend to be damp, shaded, and occur in a goldilocks temperature zone that supports diverse fungal ecosystems. (Ancient woodland, like that in Wales may seem outside such settings, but a great deal of lore centres around decaying tree stumps and mounds where thermogenesis through decomposition creates ideal year-round temperatures for moulds to thrive.)

Similarly, very hot, dry environments don't tend to garner many reports of full-blown visual paranormal activity. (And I wonder whether the decline in this activity is less about the triumph of reason than the rise in central heating). In short, hauntings tend to be dark and damp affairs.

To explore this theory further, it is worth borrowing three key elements from psychedelic research: Timothy Leary's set, setting, and dose. These are the person's psychological state, their physical environment, and the amount of substance they're exposed to.

With regards to paranormal experiences, these three factors translate as:

Vulnerable mindset – stress, sleep deprivation, grief, or emotional trauma increases susceptibility.

Suggestive setting – culturally significant locations or environments associated with supernatural activity tend to prime expectations.

Fungal presence – environments supporting mould growth provide the subtle chemical 'nudge' that tips perception towards the extraordinary.

My personal experience in the Welsh woods exemplifies this convergence: extreme fatigue (mindset), ancient woodland with cultural associations (setting), and decomposing vegetation releasing fungal spores (dose).

Here is another ghost story that reflects these factors.

Just after the Battle of Mosul in Iraq, there was an outbreak of Djinn activity.

ALL THESE SETTINGS TEND TO BE DAMP, SHADED AND OCCUR IN A GOLDILOCKS TEMPERATURE ZONE

The city had been liberated from ISIS, and I was walking through the Old Town with a colleague. 'Through' is probably not the right word, as we were walking *over* it. The scene was somewhere between the Tower of Babel and Stalingrad. It is hard to articulate such destruction. No sentences, just mountainous piles of nouns. Tiered levels of obliterated buildings and vague rings of ravines where streets and alleyways once ran. Close by, a shard of church; over there, a slice of dome. Between these jagged promontories were vast scree slopes of blasted masonry and furniture, mud bricks, electrical cables, cars, crockery, scraps of fabric, suitcases, toys, corrugated iron and corpses, that tumbled down to the rushing Tigris River hundreds of feet below.

Looters, mostly young kids, scoured these slopes and fields of destruction, pulling out scrap metal, pick-pocketing corpses. Often they'd wiggle down through the rubble into ancient cellars, storage areas, bomb shelters or fighting positions which had become tombs. You could smell the dead, the blasted masonry, burned plastic – but there was that fungal smell too, of the damp, of the crypt. The ground breathed mould, especially in the early mornings and as the evening Call to Prayer went out.

It was hideous work, and these kids were deeply traumatised. The whole city had PTSD. All the looters we spoke to mentioned *djinn*. Djinn – or genies – are believed to inhabit those thin places where the borders between the worlds were thought to be less veiled, more porous. Djinn are mentioned many times in the Qur'an and are traditionally associated with buried treasure, ruins and especially with ruins from pre-Islamic times. They haunt bad ground. The kids muttered prayers as they worked to placate the djinn into revealing stashes of money or jewellery or to protect them from unexploded munitions.

The other paranormal activity that was reported involved a very large fish that came out of the Tigris to eat people. This is hardly surprising: modern Mosul is also home to ancient Nineveh and the tomb of the Prophet Jonah, which was also said to contain a tooth of the whale that swallowed him. The locals had venerated him for generations. If this trauma-saturated community was going to hallucinate a monster, it would probably be a massive fish. (Although I should add that I spoke to a police diving unit tasked with retrieving corpses, and they said they often found them being eaten by catfish the size of small cars.)

CAVES: SET AND SETTING

As regards fungal compounds in supernatural encounters, we're probably talking about very subtle doses – just enough to

MARIANO / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: The destroyed Nebi Yunus mosque in Mosul, said to house the tomb of the Prophet Jonah.
ABOVE: Ancient stencilled handprints in the Cuevas de las Manos cave complex in Argentina.

JOHN ANGERSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Cheddar cheeses being aged in caves at Wookey Hole, Somerset. **BELOW:** The Grotto at Lourdes, where Bernadette Soubirous received her visions of the Virgin Mary, is one of the best-known examples of caves acting as vision centres or gateways to the divine.

enhance perception to amplify existing psychological tendencies or cultural expectations. And remember, if we are dealing with very powerful levels of set and setting, then the required dose might be so small as to be almost a placebo.

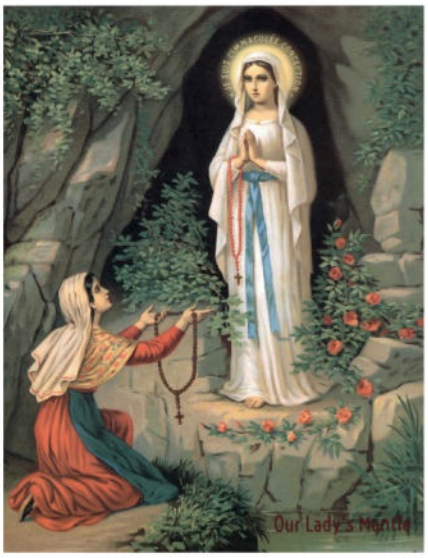
How would we begin searching for a possible fungal agent? As an archæologist, I'd want to conduct an experiment based around caves, especially those in France. Caves deliver knockout levels of set and setting, and many of them (especially limestone caves) have rich ecosystems in which over a thousand different types of mould are known to flourish.[1]

From the dawn of human consciousness, caves have served as gateways to the divine. The haunting images of Palaeolithic cave art – handprints, animal spirits, and abstract symbols dancing on stone walls – mark humanity's first recorded spiritual expressions.

They have continued to draw seekers throughout recorded history: from the Ancient Greeks (the Oracle of Delphi, the Cave of Zeus) to the Romans (Lupercal and Sibyl's cave) and the Celts (Smoo Cave, Wookey Hole). Caves also featured massively in early Christianity, being associated with major visions: the Cave of Revelation (Patmos, Greece); the Cave of La Sainte-Baume (France), associated with Mary Magdalene's visions; the Cave of Mount Gargano, associated with Saint Michael (Italy); the Cave of Saint Benedict (Italy). More recent and most famous is the Grotto of Lourdes in France, where Bernadette Soubirous received her visions of the Virgin Mary in 1858 (see **FT222:32-38**).

Think of the mindset we bring to caves: the millennia of cultural baggage of ancient spiritual and mythological associations, connections to ancestral practices, traditions of vision quests, folk tales, legends, and other superstitions.

CAVES HAVE RICH ECOSYSTEMS IN WHICH OVER A THOUSAND DIFFERENT TYPES OF MOULD FLOURISH



Then think of the settings: the stresses of complete or near-total darkness, unusual acoustics (echoes, amplification, resonance), confined conditions; the descent into womb-like spaces, otherworldly mineral shapes, sensory deprivation and loss of temporal perception which induces heightened suggestibility, enhanced introspection, and increased pattern recognition. And there is also the hypoxia, which alone can induce euphoria, hallucinations and out-of-body experiences. This would have been all the more acute for our ancestors whose flickering torches would rapidly burn up valuable oxygen which may have, in turn, caused them to breathe in more of the spore-rich air.[2]

Recent research has shown that mould toxins are far more potent than previously thought, even a few picograms (a millionth of a millionth gram) can affect humans.[3] And mycotoxins are synergistic, so that any combination is more powerful than the sum of its parts. Any experiment would have to identify dozens of caves associated with spiritual experiences; then select a control group of caves with no such records; then conduct a full mycological survey of *all* the caves. Samples would have to be collected, cultured in laboratories and analysed for psychoactive compounds… do I need to go on? It would be complicated and costly, so in the meantime let's turn to another cave-mould experiment we've been running for thousands of years.

Caves have been used in the manufacture and storage of cheese since records began. Cheese is a perfect growth medium for moulds and we have learned to relish the flavours they produce. It is worth noting that, anecdotally, cheeses associated with lucid dreaming, especially blue cheeses, are all cultured in limestone caves. Furthermore, ingesting different cheeses just prior to bedtime produces different dream architectures.[4]

A deep dive on cheese moulds reveals a witches' brew of mind-altering substances. Take for example, the wonderfully named *Penicillium roqueforti* which synthesises a dozen neuroactive compounds including roquefortine C, a mycotoxin with a very

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PHOTO BY MARVIN LYNCHARD

ERIC LAFFORGUE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Sage has long been being used in 'smudging' ceremonies to repel evil sprits, but it also acts as a powerful anti-fungal. **ABOVE RIGHT:** St John's wort, along with other plants such as vervain and rue, belongs to the mediæval class of *Fuga Dæmonium* or 'flight of demons', used to combat Satanic posession.

similar structure to serotonin, DMT and psilocin.[5] It also produces Isofumigaclavines A and B, which belong to the ergot alkaloid family, similar to LSD. Most importantly *P.roqueforti* creates large amounts of tyramine – which is almost identical to dopamine – and tryptophan, which is a precursor to serotonin and melotonin.[6]

What we might be encountering in caves, and in other places where the veil between worlds seems thin, is Earth's oldest networked organisms – fungi – gently altering our perceptions and opening the doors of possibility in our minds.

And by the way, if you have read this far and think this theory is batshit crazy, you might have a point. Bat guano does indeed provide a rich matrix for different moulds to grow, and in some cultures it was used in religious rituals.

HOLY SMOKE

Another way of examining the mould-supernatural link is through its corollary – the cure. One last ghost story:

A friend of mine who lives in an ancient priory (suggestive setting) was coming through a particularly vicious divorce (vulnerable mindset). He was hearing and seeing strange things at night and called for a local Spiritualist to cleanse the house. The lady mumbled a few barely audible prayers as the sage billowed smoke that filled the room. Sage has been used for centuries in 'smudging' ceremonies to repel evil spirits. It has little going for it except that it is a spectacularly powerful anti-fungal.[7]

And so I began to research other holy smokes. It seems to be an almost universal practice and virtually every culture independently arrived at burning the strongest antifungal plants available locally: frankincense, containing the potently antifungal boswellic acids,[8] was used in Christian, Islamic, and ancient Egyptian purification rituals to drive out demons; oud contains sesquiterpenes and was used to purify spaces of spirits; copal, used in Mesoamerican ceremonies to clear negative energies, especially from caves,[9] contains antifungal diterpenes;[10] palo santo or 'holy wood' which is used against bad spirits; cedar is used in Native American cleansing ceremonies; juniper is burned in the Scottish Highlands at New Year to banish evil spirits, while St John's wort is burned at Midsummer's Eve. The list goes on: myrrh, sandalwood, rosemary, sweetgrass, impepho, mugwort.

St John's wort is of particular interest. It belongs to the *Fuga Daemonum*, a mediæval classification for antifungal plants, meaning 'flight of demons' – including vervain and rue – that were used against Satanic possession. These plants could be used for their smoke: they were burned on coals to cleanse rooms, but often the smoke was directed into corners where demons 'hide'. Other times they were worn in posies around the neck, placed under pillows or sewn into clothing. There are specific instructions for how to cleanse monasteries after damp winters, or specific cells where monks have reported the wrong sort of visions. I could go on but it's like reading a fumigation manual.

CONCLUSION

From gnomes in Welsh forests to djinn in Mosul ruins, I feel that all of my supernatural encounters may have shared an unexpected biological foundation. This theory doesn't diminish the profound impact of these experiences, but offers a potential mechanism underlying humanity's most transformative spiritual moments. The perfect storm of vulnerable mindset, culturally charged setting, and fungal compounds may create a subtle neurochemical nudge that opens our perception to the extraordinary. Next time you encounter the unexplained in a damp, dark place, consider whether you're experiencing a chemical conversation with fungi that have been communicating with humans since we first set foot in their domain.

NOTES

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Enys Tregarthen

The Forgotten Folklorist

LALLY MACBETH uncovers the life and work of the writer Nellie Slogget, aka Enys Tregarthen, whose books brought to life the lore and landscape of her native North Cornwall for young readers, despite being spurned by the folklore establishment.

Nellie Sloggett is not a name that gets uttered very often these days, but she is nevertheless a very important figure in the history of folk collection, and someone who should be far better celebrated for her important contributions to folklore.

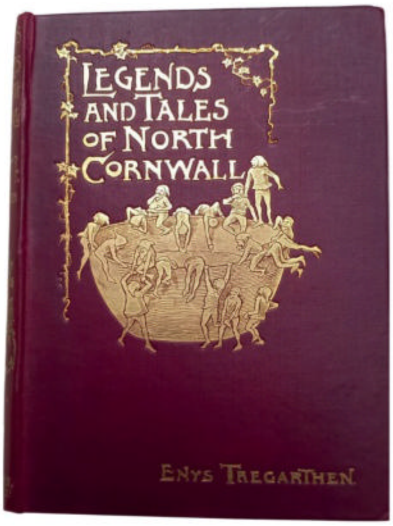
Nellie was born in Cornwall on 29 December 1851 to Moses and Sarah Sloggett. Moses was a fisherman, and died when Nellie was six, so she was mostly brought up by her mother. After her husband's death Sarah struggled to make ends meet and got a job cleaning in the town. Times were hard, and eventually the decision was made to move in with Nellie's aunt, uncle and their children. They all lived together in a comfortable townhouse in the centre of the small fishing town of Padstow, and life got much better. Nellie's uncle ran a business in the town and the family were able to live a good life.

As a child, Nellie spent most of her time outdoors exploring the small coves and inlets that litter the coastline in this rugged part of North Cornwall. On the north coast the landscape is wild and windswept with craggy cliffs and sea that is so deep and blue it looks as if mermaids could leap from it at any moment. It was a captivating environment for a young mind. Nellie wiled away her days picking flowers and running home to identify them, as well as learning the names of the many birds that inhabited the coastline that she walked. It was an idyllic childhood of immersion in nature and all the magnificent tales that came with being in a small population of fisherfolk. As we shall see, this part of Cornwall is full of piskies, goblins, spriggan and faery folk; they steal cream, and make knocking noises deep below ground, and wherever there is trouble there is usually a naughty piskie at the heart of it. Nellie listened awe-struck to these stories in childhood, and as she wandered the coast and moorlands, she too became consumed by these tales the townspeople would share with her, and was inspired to make up her own.

HELEN HOTSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: The Cornish fishing village of Padstow, where Nellie spent her life. **BELOW:** Nellie's first book as Enys Tergarthen.

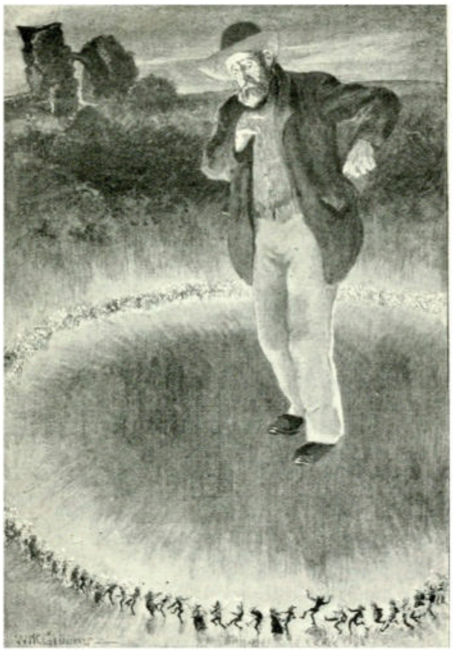
> Nellie spent most of her time exploring the coves and inlets that litter the coastline



FROM FICTION TO FOLKLORE

Whilst this all might sound like a perfect existence, at the age of 17 Nellie was tragically struck by a life-changing illness. She was sadly never to truly recover from it and was left permanently paralysed from the waist down. Confined to her top-floor bedroom, she could no longer wander the beaches freely as she had done, and so she found solace in writing, and in dreaming about the outside world she had left behind. She began a journal in which she recorded what she could see from her bedroom window: the flowers, the smells, the weather and of course the sounds of the birds and the street beneath her bedroom window. As she gained confidence in her recording of these details she gradually turned to stories, each of them inspired by the places, people and folklore that she had once been so engaged in. Aged 35, in 1885, she had her first book published, *Daddy Longlegs, and His White Heath Flower*, under the alias 'Nellie Cornwall'. It's not known why she chose to use this surname, but perhaps the mention of Cornwall was thought to be a good marketing strategy, situating

MATTHEW SHAW



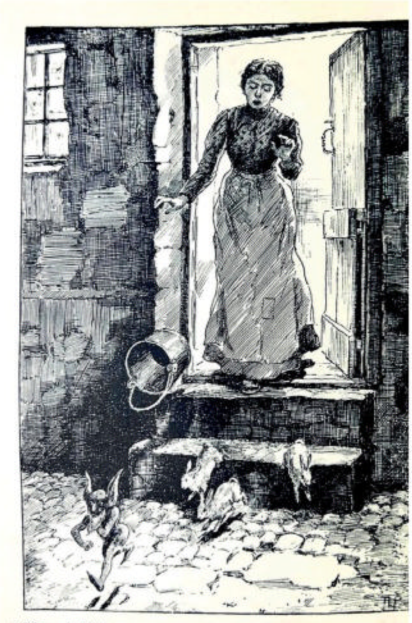
ABOVE LEFT: Hawks Tor, Bodmin Moor. The wild landscape of North Cornwall was a constant inspiration to Nellie, even when she was confined to her room. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Jan Brewer is "Piskey-laden" in a story from *North Cornwall Fairies and Legends* (1907). **BELOW:** The frontispiece of *The Piskey Purse* (1905).

her stories even more deeply in the land. It's also not known how her stories found their way to a publisher, but Padstow even then attracted tourists, so perhaps a visitor got to hear of Nellie's way with words.

At this point her stories were resolutely fictional; although they were mostly based in Cornwall, they tended toward tales about children exploring the moors, roaming free, and often discovering treasure, and/or defeating some sort of evil character – typical works of the period that appealed to children and young adults. Once Nellie had begun, she wrote prolifically, publishing over 11 books by 1902, and a number of short stories in magazines.

Then in 1905 at the age of 55 she decided to change tack. She chose a new name, Enys Tregarthen, and began writing exclusively under this fresh alias. These new books took her far away from the genre stories of her earlier career. As Enys, she started to explore the folklore of this forgotten part of north-west Cornwall and the tales of the caves, beaches and moorlands that surrounded her – the world that had so captured her imagination as a child. These new stories contained devils and piskies and changelings (some have suggested that she began to see faeries at this time). They danced through the pages of her books in fresh and thrilling ways. However, what made them truly different from what came before was that all the tales were deeply rooted in the communities that surrounded her; they had all been collected from real people and were situated in place.

She begins her book *The Piskey Purse: Legends and Tales of North Cornwall* (1905) with the sentence: "The tales given in this small volume, with one exception, are from North Cornwall, where I have always lived." [1] It is clear she had decided to move away from writing fiction and to become a folklorist; the question is, how did she find and collate her material? She had very limited mobility so was unable to conduct research in the same way that many of her contemporaries, such as William Bottrell or Margaret Courtney, would have, by visiting places and people. Instead, it seems, people came to her, up the stairs to her little kingdom at the top of the house. She had a near-constant trail of visitors who came to share their folk tales and encounters with fairy folk and the realm beyond.



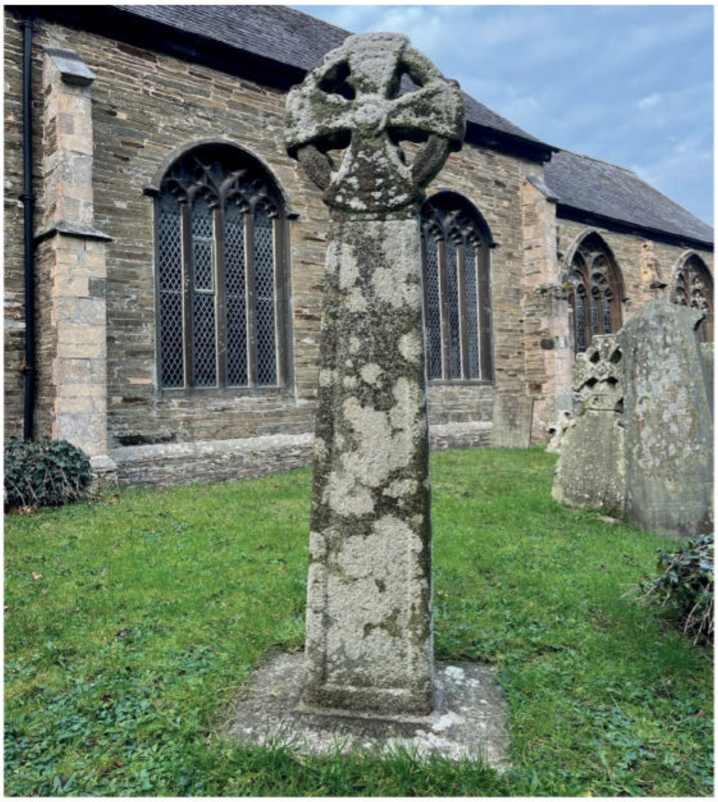
' The ugly little creature sped away, followed by three wee hare

Letters also played a significant role. Nellie maintained correspondence with numerous people over her lifetime who shared stories with her. Letters offered her access to an outside world she had barely seen since childhood, but which through her writing and memories she managed to keep alive.

Another of her techniques was looking back to the stories from her childhood memories, stories that she had heard during her adventures in the streets of Padstow: tales of piskies stealing bowls of junket and witches guarding wells. Through these tales collected from conversations, letters and overheard snippets Nellie created a rich and dynamic realm from the confines of her bedroom, one that had been completely overlooked by her contemporaries. At the point she was writing, fairy stories had largely fallen out of favour with folklorists. It was thought that all the collecting work had been done: Nellie proved them wrong.

On rare occasions, Nellie was "taken outdoors in her cot on wheels" when she would feverishly record everything she could see and hear – the wind in her hair, the sound of the birds, the wildflowers on the cliffs – before being wheeled back home and carried to her bed.[2] She would then use these details to add to her collected folk tales, giving them life and embedding them in the landscape. Her use of a combination of sources, both real and imaginary, mean her tales are distinctive and full of vigour. While many of her contemporaries relied on more Linnaean methods of collection, Nellie's world was one of lore, not of empirical evidence. It is perhaps unsurprising that she was not recognised as a folklorist during her lifetime. She was focused on storytelling, the act of crafting the tale, beyond anything else. Publicity did not interest her. She wrote infinitely more stories than were ever published in her lifetime, and on her death she left behind a trunk filled with many more unpublished manuscripts, as well as her extensive correspondence and scrapbooks and diaries filled with pictures and notes.

Yates
Elizabeth with

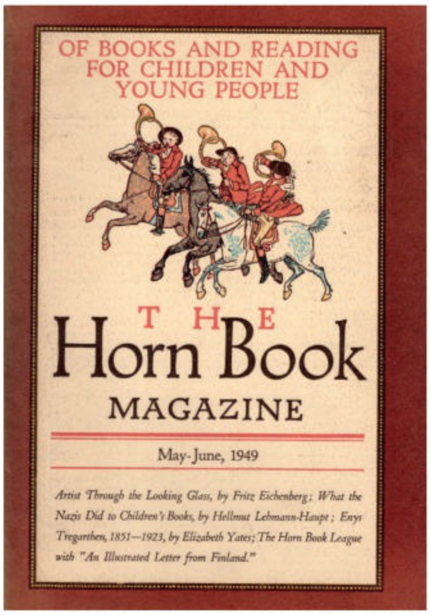

MATTHEW SHAW

ABOVE LEFT: The American writer Elizabeth Yates, who came to Cornwall to search for 'Enys' in 1939. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The graveyard where Nellie Sloggett, who died in 1923, is buried. **BELOW:** The May-June 1940 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine* in which Yate's account appeared.

SEARCHING FOR MISS SLOGGETT

In 1923, the American playwright and storyteller Harriet S Wright visited Cornwall in search of 'Enys Tregarthen'. Harriet had discovered Nellie's work in America, while reading stories to children in Greenwich Village. The children had been captivated and Harriet had come to hunt down this elusive folklorist about whom so little was known. She hunted high and low, finally finding the answer to Enys's identity in Padstow's post office, where someone happened to overhear her conversation and proclaim: "That is not her real name. She is Miss Sloggett." [3] The eavesdropper's wife turned out to be a good friend of 'Miss Sloggett' and arrangements were made for Harriet to visit her. She soon found herself in Nellie's room, with Nellie and 'her frail body… made as comfortable as possible in a reclining position on her bed". [4] They discussed her stories and how popular they were with American children and Nellie seemed interested by this, but true to form was even more interested in what tales this American visitor might have brought with her. Nellie died only a few months after this visit.

> "Nellie's world was her room; but its walls were not to be her boundaries"


OF BOOKS AND READING
FOR CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE

THE
Horn Book
MAGAZINE

May-June, 1949

Artist Through the Looking Glass, by Fritz Eichenberg; What the Nazis Did to Children's Books, by Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt; Enys Tregarthen, 1851—1923, by Elizabeth Yates; The Horn Book League with "An Illustrated Letter from Finland."

However, the path does not end there. In 1939, nearly 15 years after Nellie's death, another American was on the trail of Enys Tregarthen – the writer Elizabeth Yates. Elizabeth and her husband had been sent in search of Enys/Nellie by Bertha Miller, the founder of the children's literature periodical *The Horn Book Magazine*. Bertha had written to Elizabeth, in the summer of 1937 with the words "Do you know the legends of Enys Tregarthen?" and was hopeful that Elizabeth might be able to track down Enys, since she was eager to republish her stories.[5] Elizabeth asked around Padstow to no avail; no one seemed to have any recollection of a writer named Enys Tregarthen. But finally someone recalled that Enys was, in fact, Nellie Sloggett, who had been dead since 1923. Elizabeth found Nellie's gravestone in the churchyard and tracked down Alice Maude Rawle, Nellie's cousin, who had cared for her in her final years and who was now in possession of the trunk of papers. Over tea, "saffron buns and 'thunder and lightning'" Alice shared the contents of the trunk with Elizabeth.[6] Having known that the papers were important enough to keep, but not what to do with them, Alice seized the opportunity to interest the illustrious American author in her cousin's legacy and they became fast friends, with Elizabeth visiting on a number of further occasions. On her final visit before returning home Maude gave her the trunk of papers.

Nellie's archive had found a loving home, and Elizabeth used it well, collecting together *Piskey Folk: A Book of Cornish Legends* (1940) with a foreword that explained her enthusiasm for Nellie's work in which she recounts her experience of being taken into Nellie's room for the first time, with its expansive views over the River Camel and the tors of Bodmin Moor. Elizabeth eloquently puts it that "Nellie's world was her room; but its walls were not to be her boundaries".[7] Elizabeth would go on to publish a further two longer-form stories, *The Doll Who Came Alive* (1942) and *The White Ring* (1949).

MATTHEW SHAW

ABOVE: May Day celebrations in Padstow, with one of the town's two 'Obby 'Osses getting in on the action. A century on from Nellie's death, there has been a remarkable revival of interest in British folklore, customs and traditions.

A 'PROPER' FOLKLORIST?

In her own lifetime, Nellie was largely disregarded by other folklorists, with Charlotte Burne, then president of the Folklore Society, stating in a review of two of Nellie's books that "she has chosen to put her material into the shape of fiction, dressing it out with characters, dialogues, descriptions, and bits of word-painting, so that it is absolutely valueless as evidence".[8] "Valueless as evidence" is a damming accusation. Being spurned by such an influential figure in the world of folklore was no doubt extremely damaging to Nellie's work being considered as anything more than stories for children. Her last book published in her lifetime came out in 1911, but the lack of a publisher clearly didn't seem to deter her and she kept writing right up until her death in 1923.

That her appeal as a writer and collector seems to have been truly understood only in America is corroborated by her obituary in a local Cornish newspaper, which refers to her great fame in the US.[9] We can largely credit Elizabeth Yates with widening Nellie's appeal and presenting her for the first time as a proper folklorist. I cannot help but think that Elizabeth – a prolific writer and diarist – saw in Nellie something of herself, someone who was also inspired by tales of enchantment, Arthurian landscapes and faery lore.

Piskie stories are now seen as an important thread in Cornish folklore, and Nellie was one of the first people to write these stories down from north Cornwall. For generations they had been passed down orally, and she had the foresight to put pen to paper and record them. Yes, perhaps there was some artistic licence taken in their re-telling, but given that she lived a life marked by pain and illness, it is all the more remarkable that she continued in her pursuit of giving voice to the piskies and the folk who had seen them. Nellie recognised that her stories needed to be enjoyable and readable, and this is what sets her apart from many other folklorists of the period. Rather than being bogged down by facts or a need for meticulously recorded sources, she opted for romanticism, for telling a story and for painting a picture of a world. She chose to use local dialect, meaning we have terms recorded by her from the villages and towns in the area that appear nowhere else in the written record. Her writing is not always the most factual, but is often the most evocative of its period and of Cornwall's otherworldly atmosphere.

She recognised that for her writing to have the widest possible appeal, it needed to be entertaining. She chose characters and places to pin the folk stories to, in order to create a level of recognition and understanding in the reader, to allow them to be able to place themselves into the stories and for them to imagine that perhaps they might encounter a piskie too. In many ways, she made the folk story egalitarian. She took it away from the recesses of academia and gave it back to the people. Nellie gave folk tales a contemporary form for a mass Edwardian audience, and even in her retellings she managed to preserve a sense of true folklore: ultimately, she deserves to be much better appreciated for her contribution to folk collection in the early 20th century.

NOTES

1 Enys Tregarthen, *The Piskey Purse: Legends and Tales of North Cornwall* (London, 1905).

2 Elizabeth Yates, 'Enys Tregarthen 1851-1923', *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 25 (May 1949), pp. 231-238.

3 Harriet S Wright, 'A Visit with Enys Tregarthen', in ES Norton (ed.), *Folk Literature of the British Isles* (London, 1978).

4 Ibid

5 Yates, 'Enys Tregarthen 1851-1923'.

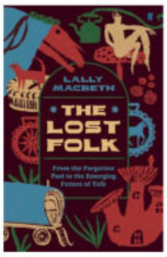
6 Elizabeth Yates, foreword to Enys Tregarthen, Piskey Folk: A Book of Cornish Legends (New York, 1940).

7 Yates, 'Enys Tregarthen 1851-1923'.

8 C Burne, 'Short Notices', Folklore, vol. 19, no.4 (30 Dec 1908), pp. 505-510.

9 '"Nellie Cornwall" Passes Away at Padstow', *Newquay Guardian and Cornwall Chronicle*, 26 Oct 1923, p. 2.

For an academic paper on Enys Tregarthen, see Simon Young's '"Her Room was Her World": Nellie Sloggett and North Cornish Folklore', *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 11(2), Dec 2017, DOI:10.1515/jef-2017-0016.



LALLY MACBETH is an artist, writer and curator based in Cornwall. She founded The Folk Archive in 2020, and co-founded Stone Club with Matthew Shaw in 2021. Her first book, *The Lost Folk: From the Forgotten Past to the Emerging Future of Folk*, is out now from Faber.

FORTEAN TV REVISITED

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

In 1997 and 1998, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which **REV LIONEL FANTHORPE** presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he concludes his series rewatch with a look at Fortean TV's last hurrah – the 1998 Christmas Special…

It's a relief after the horrors of *Fortean TV Uncut* (**FT464:46-51**) to find that Lionel Fanthorpe was given one last hurrah by Channel 4 – an "X-mas Files" seasonal special punning off the then wildly popular US drama series featuring Agents Mulder and Scully. The intro treats us to a bonkers festive micro-budget remix of the FTV title sequence, shamelessly exploiting Fanthorpe's "resemblance to a certain Mr Claus" as he promises to uncover for us the "truth behind the tinsel."

I have read elsewhere that the Rapido production team behind *FTV* had more than adequate finances, but delighted in making stuff look cheap on purpose.[1] Was this also true for their supernatural spin-off?

Fanthorpe starts by attending Charles W Howard's Santa school in Michigan, where gentlemen of a certain physical disposition have been practising their belly laughs since the 1930s.[2] The Santa students ponder potential questions posed by children, such as "how do we explain why there are so many Santas?"[3] and practise stretching out their muscles after hours of jiggling little kiddies on their laps. Advice is even given on how to drink milk through a giant false beard (the pro tip is to use a straw).

LEFT AND BELOW: The hastily rejigged titles are strangely evocative of zero-budget children's television of an earlier era.

FANTHORPE TRACES SANTA BACK 5,000 YEARS TO SHAMANS CELEBRATING THE MID-WINTER SOLSTICE

So far it's all very seasonal, and back within the programme's light entertainment comfort zone, but flashes of forteana appear. School manager Holly Valent claims she saw the elves herself when she was little.[4] And I am delighted to say her son has kept up the family obsession.[5]

Two miles up the road we meet Wally Bronner and take a tour of his superstore wonderland, which celebrates Christmas 365 days a year. Wally is quick to provide scriptural support for his cheerful brand of Christo-capitalism. His life story is on the Bronner's website and the store itself has branched out in recent years to cover other seasonal celebrations.[6]

Fanthorpe traces Santa back 3,000 or 5,000 years (he contradicts himself) to unspecified "shamans" celebrating the mid-winter solstice with blood sacrifice and drunken orgies.[7] Emma Restall Orr, a modern-day Druid (there's no attempt to challenge or contextualise this identification) explains it's easy for her and her flock to accept Santa – the "spirit of winter… that force of regeneration" – as they already believe in other spirit entities and the fairies as part of life. Mistletoe is particularly important, she tells us, as the white berry represents "the semen of the Sky God".[8]

She claims very ancient roots for her oral tradition, [9] but there's no admission this religion is being actively regenerated by the considerable creative efforts of Restall Orr and her peers. She should take some credit: parts of a rite she wrote were used in the 2012 Paralympic closing ceremony seen by a global audience of 750 million.

Next, Fanthorpe hides behind some trees decorated with animal entrails,[10] then sets off across Somerset with a massive shotgun and an outsized ammo belt stretched across his leather biking jacket, Terminator-style. He joins local gunmen in "wassailing" an apple tree, blasting away at the evil spirits and thus ensuring a good cider crop. The villagers explain that some puritan parsons had tried to put a stop to their pagan revelry, but Fanthorpe is happy to turn a blind eye where there's alcohol involved. There's also quality folk music and dancing down the Butcher's Arms and it's clearly an excellent opportunity for young and old to get together in a small community.

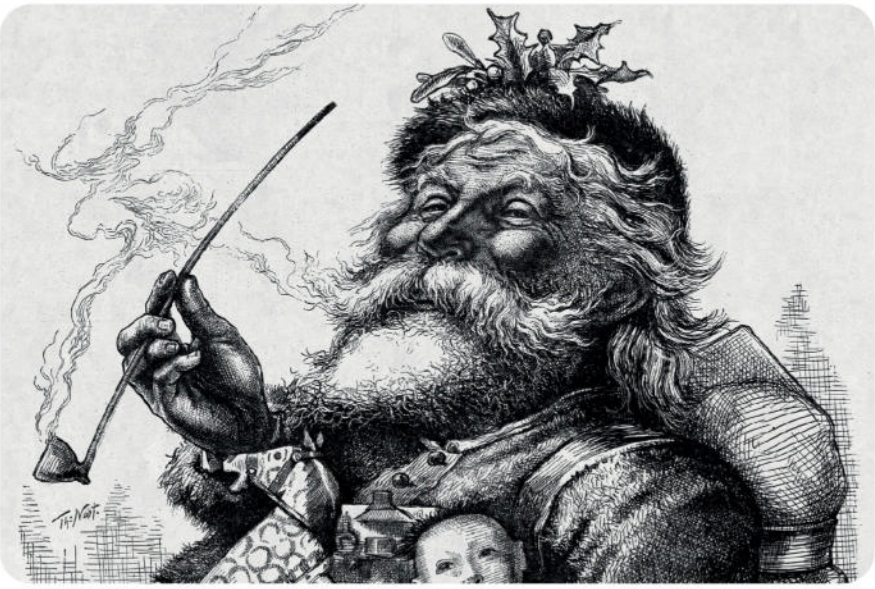
"During the 4th century" the Church began to co-opt pagan celebrations and refocus them around the birth of Christ, in what Fanthorpe calls "the mother of all marketing miracles". It's true that Christian clergy forced an explicit connection between the Roman festival celebrating the birth of the SUN and the baby SON of God – as Restall Orr spells out for us rather painfully. There are other theories, and at some point the Nordic celebration of Yule probably complicated things further.[11]

Fanthorpe moves us steadily on to Christmas Present (ho ho ho) and traces the import of seasonal fir trees back to Prince Albert. As usual, the reality is more nuanced,[12] but he's on safer ground when he claims the Victorians invented the Christmas card.[13] American political cartoonist Thomas Nast takes a break from drawing subhuman Irish ape-men[14] to create Santa out of existing elements of St Nicholas, the shaman and his own appearance. Fanthorpe further credits Nast as responsible for the reindeer sled, but depictions in verse and illustration predating him can be found.[15] For Coca-Cola's subsequent hand in shaping Nast's work into our modern image of Santa Claus, thanks are due to artist Haddon Sundblom.[16]

It doesn't always matter whether you were a good or a bad boy, Fanthorpe assures us, cutting to scenes of literally Hitler celebrating Nazi Christmas with giant swastikas.

In Copenhagen, we join the World Santa Claus and Christmas Elves Congress [17] and meet Dayton C Fouts, the World's Oldest Santa, who has put in 60 years of honourable service. This must have been one of his very last appearances, for Fouts had died by the time of broadcast in 1998.[18] There's also some very Danish Christmas-themed stand-up; personally, I love dry

WALLY BRONNER



TOP: Wally Bronner, comfortable with cash for Christmas. **CENTRE:** Did our ancestors really hang intestines to decorate trees? **ABOVE:** US cartoonist Thomas Nast's ur-Santa of 1881.

ANDY PARK
mr Christmas

TOP: Scenes from World Santa Day include meeting the planet's oldest and gayest Father Christmases. **CENTRE:** Fanthorpe visits the tomb of St Nicolas. **ABOVE:** Andy Park, the tabloids' 'Mr Christmas'. Just don't lend him your phone..

WE MEET AN UNNAMED GAY SANTA IN PINK WHO WE ARE TOLD COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET RATHER THAN DOWN THE CHIMNEY

Scandinavian comedy.

Peter Stuart, a Canadian Santa, takes a conservative stand against female Santettes, warning that kids will complain if deprived of beardy old men. (I went down a bit of a rabbit hole here and can confirm this is not the same Peter Stuart as the *Eurotrash* director who was executive producer on the show.) Then we meet an unnamed Gay Santa in festive pink, who we are told comes out of the closet, rather than down the chimney. But the traditionalists are most furious at attempts to relocate Santa from Danish Greenland to Northern Finland with the addition of a "cheap and vulgar souvenir shop" on enemy territory.

Fanthorpe believes Santa's real home is actually in Myra, Turkey, where St Nicholas was born (**FT56:42-45, 309:34-39 355:6-7, 454:4**). Of course, he dresses up as Indiana Jones, complete with a wide brimmed hat and… a horse; which seems to be a bit of an encumbrance when exploring darkened tombs. St Nick's bones were stolen and taken to Italy by religious fanatics, which is ironic as he was also the patron saint of thieves and prostitutes, saving three virgins from a life of sin by… drumroll… putting gold coins into their stockings.[19] Turkish authorities try to cash in with a brown skinned Father Christmas visiting a mosque, in an image likely to unite radical Islamists, Western fundamentalists and secular Christmas-sceptics together in a festive spirit of condemnation.

Before they can recover their breath, we cut to a wind-up Santa furiously masturbating in the office of Ingeborg Albert at Santa Strippers "who put the X into Xmas." Meanwhile, in Wiltshire, "Mr Christmas" Andy Park eats a complete roast dinner every single day, watches the Queen's speech on videotape and wraps his presents to open again the next morning. He records his own novelty single – the first of several it seems. [20] An article from 2016 claims Andy managed to give up Christmas for two full weeks before relapsing.[21] He had another wobble in 2018 when he admitted in court to pulling a reverse Santa Claus on someone's iPhone,[22] but as we know, St Nick stands by thieves and Andy was back going strong for the festive season in 2023.[23]

In the South Wales village of "Flan" (yes that's how the subtitles have it; Fanthorpe sort of clears his throat) the Mari Lwyd is presented as the last remnant of a British custom that was a precursor to Carol singing, or perhaps the Christmas panto. A decorated horse's skull was once paraded door-to-door to elicit cakes and ale from superstitious villagers, but these days they just go straight down the pub. Gwyn Evans inherited the tradition from his father. I was sceptical this common name and throw-away detail was going to help me narrow down the actual location, but lo! I found him,[24] and can reveal the village was in fact Llangynwyd. Perhaps we can forgive Fanthorpe.[25]

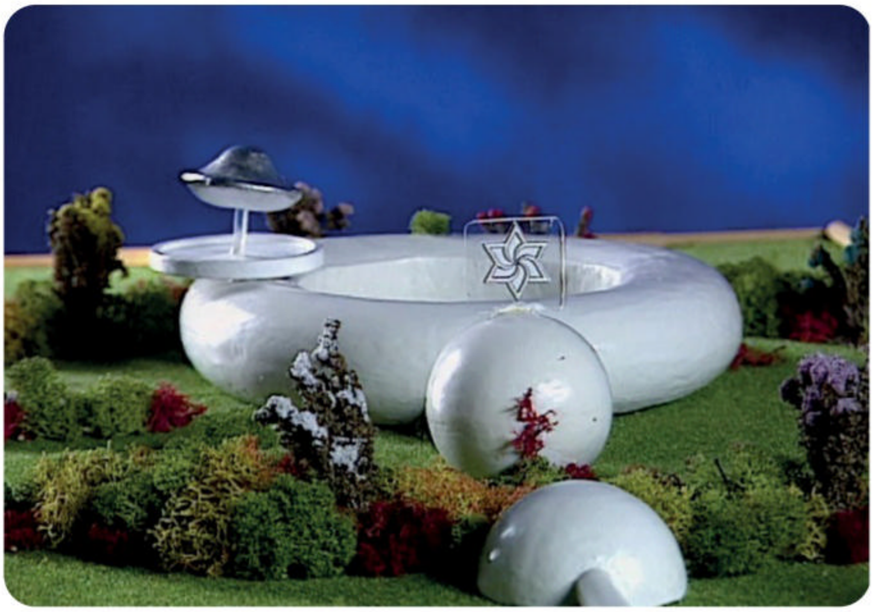
Then a bit more pagan street theatre in Wiltshire, with the "Marshfield Mummers" featuring Old Beelzebub, Saucy Jake (or Jack)[26] and Good King William covered in strips of old newspaper. Good vanquishes evil. It appears this play, like many community events, was suspended in 2021 during the Covid pandemic, but I'm delighted to say I've managed to contact them via their website. Despite losing members over the years due to the inevitable passage of time they're still keeping this weird tradition alive.[27]

The panto horse, Fanthorpe claims spuriously, can also be traced back to "ancient British horse sacrifices",[28] and festive crossdressing has it's roots in the Roman Saturnalia (**FT413:53**), which in more recent years has been reclaimed as the original Gay Christmas.[29]

To discuss the the Star of Bethlehem (**FT270:34-39**), Fanthorpe finally meets a television personality to rival his own level of eccentricity: Sir Patrick Moore, astronomer, broadcaster, xylophone prodigy and UFO hoaxer (**FT172:22, 298:26, 352:31, 370:32**). It wasn't any ordinary planet or star, comet or conjunction, he tells us, as the wise men, being skilled astronomers, would have realised. Patrick suggests two meteors heading in the same direction at different times, but his heart isn't in it. Much of this came up in *Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious World* (**FT412:46**) and the Royal Observatory at Greenwich has a nice summary of the various theories.[30]

However, Raëlian bishop Brigitte Boisselier believes the Star of Bethlehem was in fact a UFO. Moses, Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus were all sent by aliens, with signs in the sky placed to preannounce their arrival. There were supposedly 80,000 members of this cult in the late 1990s, a massive over-estimate uncritically repeated by *Fortean TV*. French authorities at the time believed there were at most 20,000 Raëlians worldwide, others considerably less. The movement was founded by French car-racing journalist Claude Vorilhon – who changed his name to Raël – when the Elohim (a Hebrew word meaning "gods") visited him in 1973 in a remote part of

TOP: Local communities have reinvented traditions across England and Wales. **CENTRE:** Lionel Fanthorpe meets the astronomer and TV presenter Sir Patrick Moore. **ABOVE:** Claude Vorilhon, aka Raël, founder of the Raëlian cult, with some of his supposed 80,000 strangely-garbed acolytes.



TOP: Raëlian Bishop Brigitte Boisselier. **CENTRE:** A model of the space embassy the Raëlians planned to build. A Raëlian swastika can be seen whirling like an extractor fan inside the Star of David. **ABOVE:** Fanthorpe completes his Christmas Quest with a visit to the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury.

France (**FT142:6, 168:6**). He claims they'll be back by 2035, so we're shown a model of their proposed interplanetary embassy, seemingly constructed from cardboard loo rolls and ping pong balls; it would make a good Christmas decoration. A recent Netflix documentary provided further insight into Raël's passion for racing cars and advanced self-pleasuring techniques.[31]

Boisselier explains that Mary was abducted and inseminated by the extraterrestrials, who had designed the God-child they desired at the DNA level. This charismatic front woman was to become better known within a few years as the director of Clonaid, "the first human cloning company", an organisation that courted international controversy with its repeated and unevidenced claims to have produced a number of clone children, several of whom would now be well into adulthood.[32] Bishop Boisselier has also been involved in Raëlian attempts to rehabilitate the swastika, as can be seen in the footage from *Fortean TV*, and in Clitoraid's (yes, really) efforts to support victims of female genital mutilation.[33]

To wrap up his quest, Fanthorpe visits Glastonbury to see the Holy Thorn that "grows in the wrong place" and "flowers at the wrong time." He takes us back to the time of Joseph of Arimathea, who offered up his own tomb for the body of Christ, and recounts the legend that Joseph later visited Glastonbury. Allegedly it was his hawthorn staff that took root in England's fertile soil. Today the descendants of this magic tree still flower twice a year – at Christmas and (more normally) around Easter. Fanthorpe claims scientists have traced the Holy Thorn back to a variety that grows only in Palestine, but I can't find any evidence for this. If grown from a seed or cutting the Holy Thorn loses its magical abilities and only flowers normally, so any new plants must be carefully grafted.

This suggests a biological explanation perhaps stemming (ahem) from some minor incompatibility between plant signalling molecules in the root stock and the graft. Anyway, there's more detail on the history and mythology of the Holy Thorn here, including the tradition that a sprig is presented annually to Buckingham Palace.[34] You can buy an inert cutting online.[35]

And that's it. We're sung out with "the Christmas Quest" and Fanthorpe's good friend 'Elf'!

I'm sorry we never got another series, and it has to be said that the whole shebang was really powered by the force of our host's personality. *Fortean TV* was clearly designed to provide an inspirational and entertaining overview rather than any rigorous insight (or indeed accurate dates or correctly spelt names – a bane throughout my research into the show). But inspirational it was.

Maybe, just maybe, it should have been *Fanthorpe TV* all along?

ABOVE: Lionel Fanthorpe and his friend ‘Elf’ sing us out on the last ever instalment of *Fortean TV*.

NOTES

1 www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jun/10/eurotrash-is-back-brexit-special-we-have-a-guy-who-paints-portraits-with-his-penis

2 It’s still going strong (www.santaclausschool.com/), although it was established in 1937 not 1936 as stated on the show.

3 For advice from Mumsnet, check out: www.mumsnet.com/talk/parenting/1630676-How-do-I-explain-multiple-Santas

4 https://eu.usatoday.com/story/travel/destinations/2017/12/21/santa-school-its-hard-work-father-mother-christmas/972057001/

5 www.santavalent.com/about

6 www.bronners.com/wally-bronners-life-story

7 or a slightly less sensationalist account of a Neolithic solstice see: www.english-heritage.org.uk/christmas/the-history-of-christmas/

8 Seemingly this seminal link is shared across a number of cultures (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mistletoe) although in Norse myth the white blobs represent the tears of Frigg (www.kew.org/read-and-watch/mistletoe-christmas-tradition).

9 www.druidry.co.uk/bdo-history/

10 There’s limited support for this online, and it’s dismissed as a myth in this round up: www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/14/inventing-christmas-tree-bernd-brunner-review

11 https://historycooperative.org/pagan-origins-of-christmas/

12 www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/christmas-greenery-history/

13 www.vam.ac.uk/articles/victorian-christmas-traditions

14 He was also involved in the evolution of “Uncle Sam” and the elephant and donkey logos of the two main US political parties, examples of his treatment of us Irish are available here: https://thomasnastcartoons.com/irish-catholic-cartoons/irish-stereotype/

IT HAS TO BE SAID THAT THE WHOLE SHEBANG WAS REALLY POWERED BY THE FORCE OF OUR HOST’S PERSONALITY

15 https://blog.christmasnightinc.com/origins-santa-sleigh-reindeer/

16 www.coca-colacompany.com/about-us/history/haddon-sundblom-and-the-coca-cola-santas

17 In 2022 the Danes cancelled this Christmas celebration, it has subsequently been revived in Canada: https://twscc.ca/about/

18 www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/72699-longest-career-as-santa-claus

19 www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Nicholas

20 www.youtube.com/@wiltshirefilms/search?query=mr christmas

21 www.express.co.uk/news/weird/746760/mr-christmas-celebrates-every-day-andy-park-dinner-joey-essex/amp

22 www.thesun.co.uk/news/8023048/mr-christmas-stole-womans-iphone/

23 www.thesun.co.uk/news/25162746/man-celebrates-christmas-every-day/

24 www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/centuries-old-mari-lwyd-tradition-returns-6458668

25 www.wales.com/about/history-and-heritage/welsh-traditions-myths-and-legends/mari-lwyd

26 A reference to a postcard allegedly sent by Jack the Ripper.

27 https://knightstoves.wordpress.com/

28 The Irish were accused of raping and sacrificing horses in Gerald of Wales problematic *Topographia Hibernica.* Irish writer Blindboy Boatclub has written a timely update on life on the island, published under the same title.

29 www.allgaylong.com/blog/saturnalia-the-real-gay-christmas/

30 www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/what-was-christmas-star

31 www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/rael-documentary-netflix-claude-vorilhon-b2492207.html

32 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clonaid

33 www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/apres-le-clonage-rael-s-interesse-au-marche-des-femmes-excisees-19-06-2007-2008137416.php[34]

34 www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253143/the-glastonbury-thorn-a-resurrected-symbol-of-christmas

35 www.glastonburyabbey.com/products/gifts/holy-thorn-cutting.php

RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest effort is a spooky children’s audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com.

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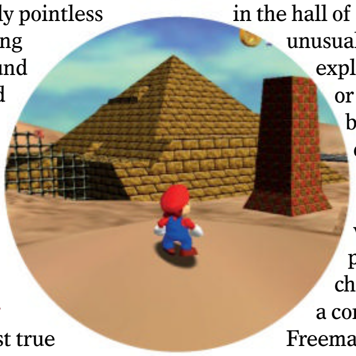
Mario the Mason?

As the Super Mario Bros franchise turns 40, **SD TUCKER** plumbs the depths of the secret occult messages allegedly coded away within its pixelated and polygonal worlds...

Forty years ago, in 1985, the genre-defining platform game *Super Mario Bros* first launched on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) console in Japan, an unparalleled 8-bit action-adventure which gave rise to videogaming's most well-known franchise – and innumerable myths and legends. The Mario games have always been full of genuine hidden secrets, but Mario's obsessive fanbase have long enjoyed spotting extra ones which are not really there, from a plot to turn players gay in *Super Mario Galaxy* (decorative stars on certain letters in the game's logo spell out the sexuality-warping hypno-phrase 'UR MR GAY'), to a subliminal encouragement for kids to commit suicide in *Luigi's Mansion* (a brief graphical glitch makes it look as though Mario's brother Luigi has just hanged himself). Some such ideas start as hoax pranks – the idea Luigi's evil arch-nemesis Waluigi's real name is Jimmy Poppadopolos, for example – but, so desperate are fans to spy new enigmas in their favourite games that they often end up believing them.

Many of the legends about methods of unlocking hidden in-game content strangely resemble esoteric methods of conjuring demons in old grimoires: instead of walking 12 times clockwise around an elm tree at midnight while reciting certain obscure words in Aramaic, electronic mages must perform certain equally obscure controller inputs with their on-screen avatar. In the groundbreaking 1996 Nintendo 64 entry *Super Mario 64*, many were so keen to play as Luigi, who was not actually in the title, that they wilfully misread random squiggles on a statue as reading 'L is real 2401', which could only have meant Luigi *was* hidden inside the game after all, the magical method of unlocking him centring upon that mysterious number 2401. Players wasted their lives performing utterly pointless actions, like getting Mario to run around a castle courtyard widdershins precisely 2,401 times, to see if this would cause Luigi to suddenly manifest beside them like Mephistopheles.[1]



As history's first true 3D platformer, *Super Mario 64* seems to have accumulated the most elaborate storehouse of lore. In direct contradiction to *Super Mario Galaxy*, it allegedly seeks to turn gay players straight; fighting his arch-enemy Bowser, Mario appears to shout "So long-a-gay Bowser!" in triumph. It's really just a mis-hearing of "So long-a-dear Bowser!", but so pervasive did this idea become that, in 2020, actual broadsheet newspapers ran pieces debunking it when the phrase was removed from a re-release of the game.[2]

Another online conspiracy theory proposes *Super Mario 64* is truly an extended subliminal Masonic initiation ceremony. As a power-up, Mario dons a cap with wings which enables him to fly, making him an avatar of Mercury and causing him to act as a psychopomp, guiding the player through the underworld of the collective unconscious. In the game's first level, Bob-Omb Battlefield, Mario ascends a perilous, ziggurat-shaped circular mountain or tower, recapitulating similar wisdom-quests from Rosicrucianism, culminating in an encounter with a royal figure in the shape of a crowned and moustachioed living bomb, King Bomb-Omb – the incarnation of the Divine King from alchemy. Meanwhile, the game begins within the hall of a castle, whose unusual layout has been explained, in jest or otherwise, as being truly "a digital Masonic temple, a portal to initiation rites veiled within pixels. The checkerboard floor, a cornerstone of Freemasonry, represents the polarised dance of light and dark, the physical realm where rituals unfold. The solar disc in the floor's centre, glowing with esoteric significance, hints at the hidden enlightenment sought by initiates, while the red carpet traces the Royal Arch's path of sacrifice and prestige. The three-tiered structure mirrors the sacred progression of Masonry's degrees – Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, Master Mason – casting Mario's adventure as a covert initiation. The Anunnaki-Jesuit-Masonic trinity may have orchestrated this, embedding the game with symbols to subtly reprogram the collective psyche of mankind."

There is even footage of Mario miraculously levitating in the game; in 2013, online *Super Mario 64* speed-runner DOTA_Teabag was playing the Tick-Tock Clock level when suddenly he was shocked to see Mario float upwards to a higher platform for no reason, which should have been impossible, according to the game's programming. The best explanation was that a rogue particle from outer-space had abruptly invaded DOTA's Nintendo 64 console, causing something called a 'single-event upset', when an ionising particle collides with a computer chip, causing a flip in the code's binary state from a 0 to a 1 or vice-versa. Allegedly, such rare events had caused planes to malfunction and crash in the past, and there were fears one day they could affect a computer-connected nuclear device, causing planetary Armageddon – had Mario just proved such fears were real? Maybe not. An interested tech-nerd bought DOTA's copy of the game, took it apart, and found the true likely culprit: a faulty cartridge.[4]

Yet, whether he's a Mason or not, the basic lesson of such unlikely tales remains: Mario really can reprogram his players' minds.

NOTES

[1] https://gaming-urban-legends.fandom.com/wiki/U_R_MR_GAY; www.mariowiki.com/List_of_rumors_and_urban_legends

[2] www.independent.co.uk/games/super-mario-3d-all-stars-64-so-long-gay-bowser-nintendo-switch-b498058.html

[3] https://chasingtartaria.substack.com/p/unmasking-mario-the-esoteric-secrets; www.instagram.com/p/C0jZo5kup4A/; https://steemit.com/gaming/@johnmartinson/super-mario-and-the-occult-of-video-games

[4] www.thegamer.com/how-ionizing-particle-outer-space-helped-super-mario-64-speedrunner-save-time/; www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj8DzA9y8ls; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single-event_upset

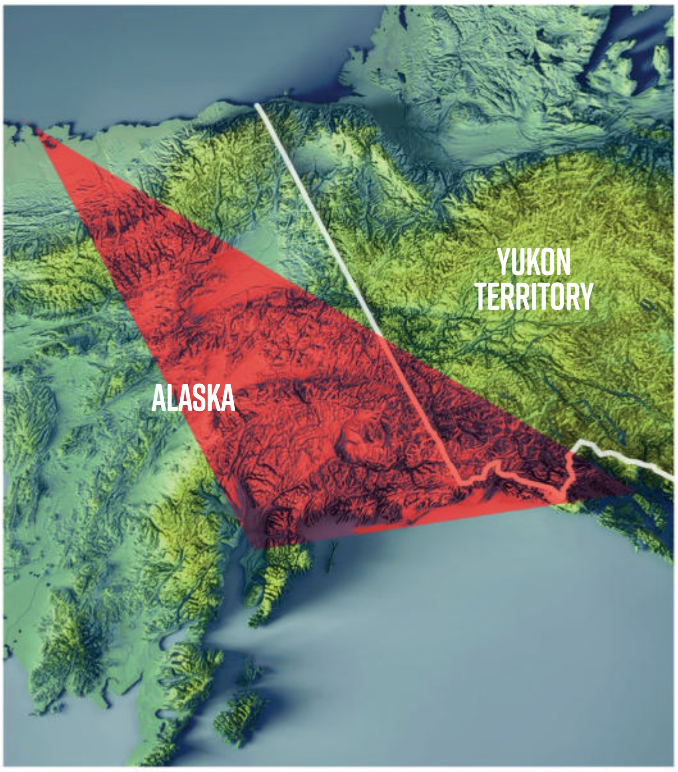
SD TUCKER is a regular contributor to FT and the author of many books on fortean subjects, including *Great British Eccentrics* (2016), *Forgotten Science* (2018), and *Blithe Spirits* (2020).

Hot spots: triangles or splodges?

Do anomalies really cluster in neat patterns, forming distinct geometric shapes? PETER A McCUE wonders whether the 'Bermuda Triangle' should be renamed the 'Bermuda Splodge'...

Are some localities anomaly hot spots? In practice, it can be hard to tell. If a few incidents receive publicity, that could encourage other witnesses to come forward. The total number of strange incidents might be no higher than elsewhere, but differential reporting could give a false impression that an area was a hotbed of strange activity. Of course, reports might arise from misperception, misinterpretation or hoaxing. The latter might entail invented witness testimony, the fabrication of physical evidence, or a combination of both (e.g. sending a bogus UFO story to a newspaper along with fabricated photos).

Another problem is the tendency for commentators to describe presumed hot spots as 'triangles', thereby implying that the strange incidents distribute themselves in a distinctly triangular pattern. Usually, no statistical evidence will be presented to show that that's the case. In truth, the geographical distribution of incidents might resemble an amorphous *splodge* rather than a distinct geometric shape.



PETER A MCCUE

LEFT: The area covered by the so-called 'Alaska Triangle' shown in red. **BELOW LEFT:** The Alaska Range, much of which is within the 'Alaska Triangle'.

American writer Vincent Gaddis (1913-1997) instigated the fashion for describing anomaly hot spots as 'triangles'. It was he who came up with, or at least publicised, the phrase 'Bermuda Triangle', in an article in the February 1964 edition of *Argosy* magazine.[1] Numerous ships and aircraft have disappeared mysteriously in the area, which has also been the setting for other strange phenomena (see **FT143:6, 145:66, 181:24, 389:53, 447:36**). The apexes of the 'triangle' are often said to be Bermuda (in the north), San Juan, on the north coast of Puerto Rico (in the south), and Miami, on the coast of Florida (in the west). However, many of the incidents given the 'Bermuda Triangle' (BT) tag have occurred outside this arbitrarily demarcated area. In his sceptical book *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Solved* (first published in 1975), Larry Kusche (1940-2024) included maps that depicted a larger area, closer in shape to a square than a triangle.[2]

Kusche contended that many writers who'd publicised the BT had done no original research, and had simply rephrased what had been written before, thereby perpetuating errors and embellishments. And he argued that authors had sometimes withheld information that provided obvious solutions to the disappearances. He asserted that if we abandon the search for an overall theory, and investigate the incidents independently, the supposed mystery starts to unravel. However, I wonder whether Kusche was tendentiously selective in marshalling evidence to make his case, because his book omits any mention of an intriguing report from a private pilot called Bruce Gernon.

On the afternoon of 4 December 1970, accompanied by his father and another man, Gernon took off in a Beechcraft Bonanza A36 aircraft from Andros Island in the Bahamas, intending to fly to Palm Beach, Florida, via the Bimini Islands, which are also in the Bahamas. They encountered strange weather and at one stage seemed to be flying through a greyish-white haze, which Gernon calls 'electronic fog'. It seemed to make the plane's instruments malfunction. Eventually, visibility returned, and Gernon discovered that they were over Miami Beach, which they had reached in a surprisingly short time, and with a saving of fuel.[3]

The BT abuts the USA, which has other hot spots that have attracted the dubious 'triangle' tag. I'll mention two of them.

In south-eastern Massachusetts, there's the 'Bridgewater Triangle'. According to Loren Coleman, the towns of Abington, Freetown and Rehoboth make up its apexes, and it covers about 200 square miles.[4] Towns called Bridgewater and West Bridgewater lie within it. Much of it consists of a wetland area known as the Hockomock Swamp. Over the years, the area has generated sightings of UFOs,

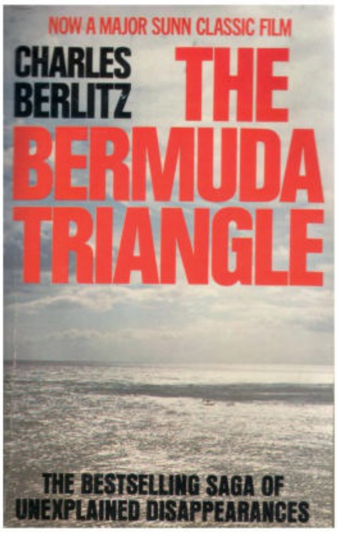
anomalous lights, mysterious creatures (e.g. strange, unknown birds) and apparitions.

According to Mike Ricksecker's book *Alaska's Mysterious Triangle*, a large part of Alaska constitutes a hot spot for mysterious events, such as the disappearance of aircraft, human disappearances, and sightings of strange animals.[5] The apexes of this supposed 'triangle' are said to be Anchorage in the south, Juneau (the state capital) in the south-east, and Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow) on the north coast. However, Ricksecker concedes that the boundaries of such 'triangles' are vague (p.27), and he provides no statistical data that justify the 'triangle' designation. In fact, some of the events that he cites seem to fall well beyond the boundaries of the Alaska Triangle. For example, he states that in April 1943, crew members of a US destroyer near the Bering Sea saw a row of red lights flying in a parallel direction, close to their ship (p.130).

On page 17 of his book, Ricksecker claims that more than 16,000 people have gone missing in the Alaska Triangle since 1988. However, on pages 45 and 109, he seems to relate this figure to the whole of Alaska, not just the triangle. It should be noted that the 'triangle' includes major population centres, such as Anchorage and Fairbanks. Therefore, if more people do indeed go missing in the Alaska Triangle than elsewhere in the state, it could simply be because there are more people there.

Ricksecker's thinking has an eclectic and 'New Age' character. He suggests, for example, that people who have vanished in strange circumstances may have gone through 'portals' into other places or other points in time. But many of the incidents that he mentions could be explicable in prosaic terms. For example, given the wild terrain and the harsh weather often experienced in this northernmost region of the USA, it's perhaps not surprising that small aircraft sometimes vanish and that people go missing.

The UK has had its own purported hot spots that have attracted the questionable 'triangle' label. Anomalous phenomena reportedly occurred in the Warminster area of Wiltshire in the 1960s and 70s (see pp.28-29). The late Ken Rogers titled his book about the case *The Warminster Triangle*.[6] The manifestations included strange sounds, UFO sightings, the alleged displacement of cattle, and other oddities. Their status has been a matter of debate,[7] and there was some hoaxing (see **FT331:40-47**).[8] However, by the end of the 1970s, the activity had largely subsided. I say 'largely', because Wiltshire has been the setting for many crop formations since the 1970s. If these are deemed to be the work of aliens or paranormal forces, it could be argued that the area has remained an anomaly hot spot. But sceptical commentators argue that all complex crop-formations are man-made. Intriguingly, though, there are reports of people experiencing unusual light phenomena while making crop formations.[9]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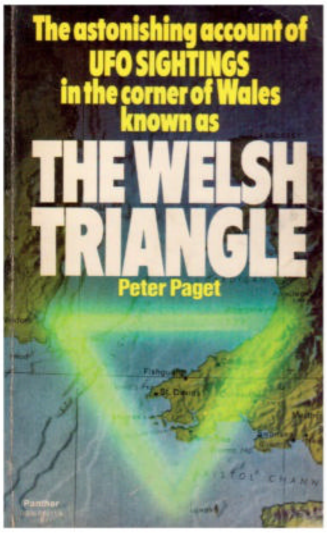
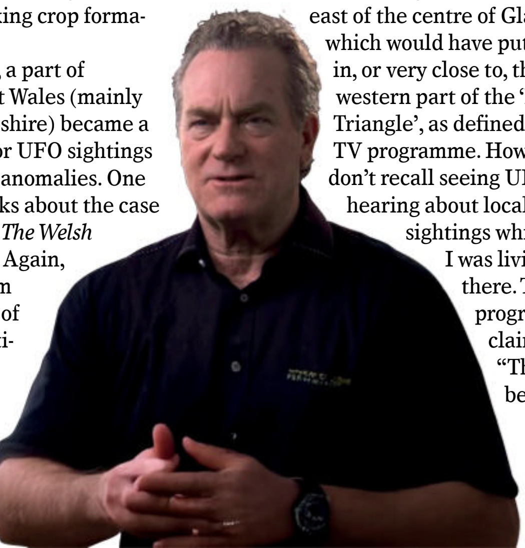
In 1977, a part of south-west Wales became a hot spot for UFO sightings

In 1977, a part of south-west Wales (mainly Pembrokeshire) became a hot spot for UFO sightings and other anomalies. One of the books about the case was titled *The Welsh Triangle*.[10] Again, though, I'm not aware of any statistical data showing that the incidents occurred within a distinctly triangular area. Moreover, the evidence in this case is far from perfect, since there are discrepant reports regarding the experiences of some of the named participants.[11] The reported activity seemed to die down in the second half of 1977, so this seems to have been a short-running case compared with the events in Wiltshire.


The astonishing account of UFO SIGHTINGS in the corner of Wales known as
THE WELSH TRIANGLE
Peter Paget
Panther

The Bonnybridge and Falkirk area of central Scotland acquired a reputation for being a UFO hot spot a few decades ago (see **FT335:26, 448:48-49**). A recently screened TV programme (an episode of the 'Alien Corridors' series on Freeview TV's *Blaze* channel) examined the case. It described the area as the 'Falkirk Triangle' and gave its apexes as Stirling (in the north), Edinburgh (in the east) and Glasgow (in the west). Assuming that there *was* a genuine hot spot, I'm doubtful whether it extended so far to the east and west. For a couple of years, between 1992 and 1994, I lived about eight miles north-east of the centre of Glasgow, which would have put me in, or very close to, the western part of the 'Falkirk Triangle', as defined by the TV programme. However, I don't recall seeing UFOs or hearing about local UFO sightings while I was living there. The TV programme claimed: "There's been no let-up in the number of sightings in the Falkirk Triangle." But my understanding is that the sightings peaked in the first half of the 1990s.[12]



LEFT: Anomaly writers love a triangle. **BELOW LEFT**: Bruce Gernon, who had a very strange experience within the 'Bermuda Triangle'.

Applied to supposed UFO and paranormal hot spots, the 'triangle' tag smacks of sensationalist tabloid journalism rather than serious reporting. Its use is only justified if it can be demonstrated, statistically, that the alleged events really have occurred within a geographical area with a well-defined triangular shape.

NOTES

1 https://www.physics.smu.edu/pseudo/BermudaTriangle/vincentgaddis.txt

2 Larry Kusche, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Solved*, Galahad Books, 2006.

3 Bruce Gernon & Rob MacGregor, *Beyond the Bermuda Triangle*, New Page Books, 2017.

4 Loren Coleman, *Mysterious America*, Paraview Pocket Books, 2007.

5 Mike Ricksecker, *Alaska's Mysterious Triangle*, independently published, 2021.

6 Ken Rogers, *The Warminster Triangle*, Coates & Parker, 1994.

7 Steve Dewey & John Ries, *In Alien Heat*, Anomalist Books, 2006.

8 David Simpson, *Conclusions from Controlled UFO Hoaxes*, Monograph Series No. 46, The Institute for Cultural Research, 2005.

9 Rob Irving & John Lundberg, *The Field Guide: The Art, History and Philosophy of Crop Circle Making* (ed. by Mark Pilkington), Strange Attractor Press, 2006.

10 Peter Paget, *The Welsh Triangle*, Grafton Books, 1988 (first pub. In 1979).

11 Peter A McCue, *Zones of Strangeness* (Chap. 8), AuthorHouse, 2012.

12 Peter A McCue, ibid. (Chap. 12).

DR PETER McCUE is a retired clinical psychologist with a long-standing interest in anomalous phenomena. He has written four books in this field as well as numerous articles for *Fortean Times.*

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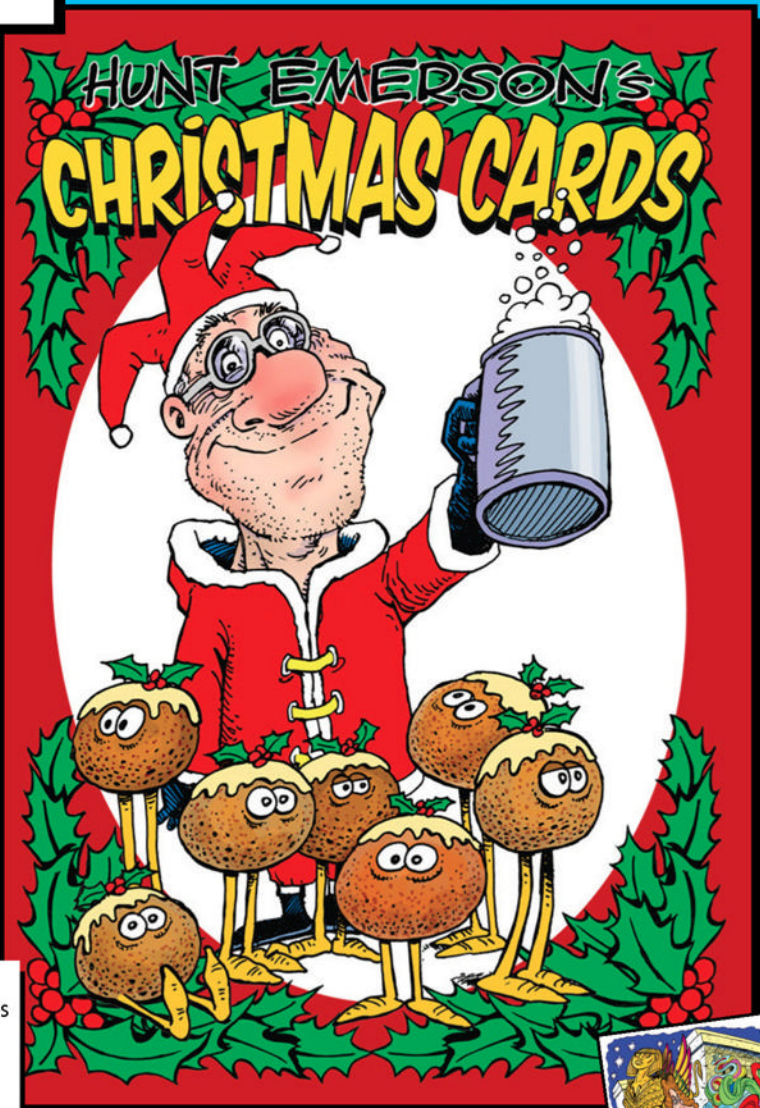
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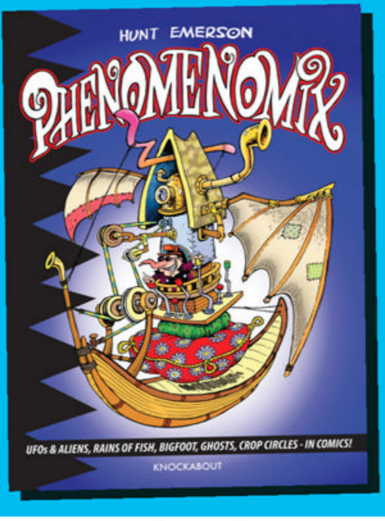
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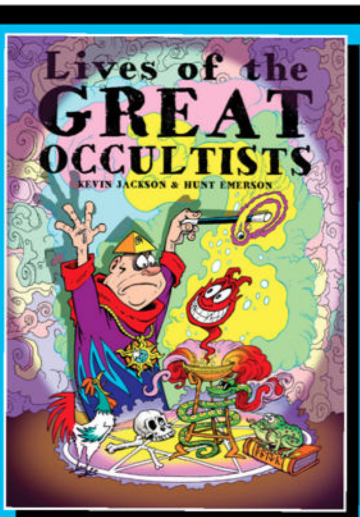
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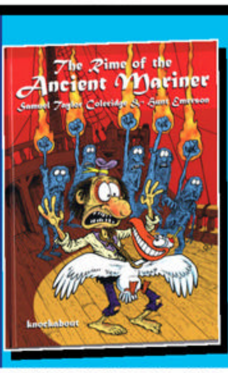
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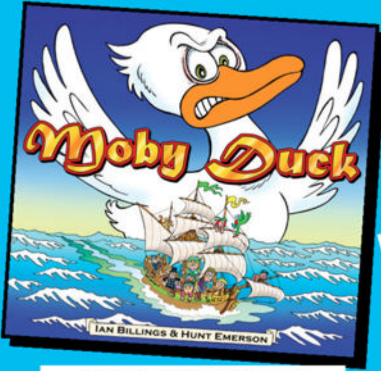
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Supernatural Bodies

Stigmata in Modern Britain and Ireland

Kristof Smeyers

Manchester University Press 2024

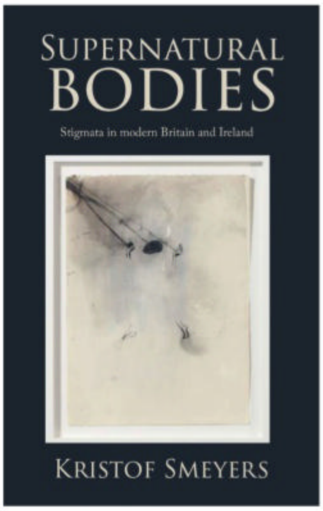
Hb, £85, 264pp, ISBN 9781526177230

In the latter half of the 19th century, a strange event began quietly in a Belgian village, sparking a controversy that eventually created divisions of opinion about the role of the supernatural in social history and in religion that had far-reaching consequences for almost every level of Western culture. A young village girl called Louise Lateau (1850-1883) became bed-ridden with a mysterious condition. By the 1870s she had manifested, in her body, the wounds of Christ's crucifixion.

Of course there had been earlier similar stigmatics – since the time of St Francis of Assisi (c.1181–1226) – but Louise's appeared in the 1870s. Gradually descriptions by visiting doctors and other notables began appearing in newspapers across Europe causing an explosion of interest and, more importantly, an often angry divisive debate. To the Catholic faithful her stigmata were nothing less than a divine call to greater faith; but to the secular they were a challenge. Those who interpreted the phenomenon as imaginative malingering – or worse, pious fraud – demanded proof or, at least, some scientific explanation. Soon doctors and other scholars visited, and they too were divided in their opinion.

This was an important Enlightenment moment which, Kristof Smeyers argues, has not received the attention it deserved as it significantly changed the nature of the religious history of Europe. Over time, on one side Louise's stigmata – and many other similar cases – were readily absorbed into popular Catholic rhetoric; but on the other, non-religious, side, the whole issue slipped out of sight and out of mind as the role of the supernatural in the development of Western culture became thoroughly marginalised (as fraud or superstition) in the lurch towards materialism.

Smeyers is to be commended for exhuming a truly amazing range of reports and local discussions of bodily stigmata from the archives of religious, academic and private institutions, collections and libraries, many of which are exposed here for the first time. His sources range from very rare manuscripts to detailed investigations by various authorities and credible scholars. The stigmatics in these cases range from fakes and frauds to authentic religious mystics, both in the Church and of the spontaneous kind (who were often found in prisons, hospitals and asylums), made all the more fascinating because of Smeyers's genuine interest in them and his eye for detail in the documented discussions and depositions.



In the 1870s a young village girl manifested, in her body, the wounds of Christ's crucifixion

Included are many instances of "supposed" or "claimed" stigmata, that fuelled the anti-superstition proponents. Sometimes these stigmata bore little resemblance to the "classical" wounds in the hands and side, and included curious figures formed on the skin – or even inside the heart – which could be interpreted as religious symbols. Such ambiguity played to the artistic imagination on the one hand and the entrenched hostility of the rationalist materialists on the other.

Several chapters are given over to English wrangles over the Tyrolean stigmatics. As the century ended, Louise Lateau was joined by Maria von Mörl and Domenica Lazarri. When some of the better-known accounts of the stigmatics were revealed to be written by English noblemen Catholics (such as the influential Lord Shrewsbury who had piously circumambulated Domenica's bed) it only made matters worse. They were denounced as papists deliberately opening the floodgates of superstition.

Soon the unedifying exchanges in newspapers and gentlemen's magazines spilled out into English streets where anti-papists began mobbing Catholic priests. Like today's fake news, tragic stories (such as possessed children dying in abusive exorcisms) vied with open ridicule of Methodists and Spiritualists.

However, there were still objections to be found among the Catholic theologians. For example, Fr Herbert Thurston – known to many of us as a sound voice of reason when dealing with hagiography – was obviously troubled by the increasing scholarly comparisons of stigmata and other mystical phenomena to similar instances in the realms of hypnosis, Spiritualism or even in the burgeoning ethnological field of cultural shamanism. Even so, he remained steadfast to the divine origin of the phenomena approved by the Church's own inquiries, which he claimed showed their authenticity by being more dramatic in their manifestations.

Smeyers – a research fellow at the University of Louvain – shows what can be discovered when a focused academic inquiry has access to the best research methods and sources. Despite the density of academic material and references, his narrative is always on point and eminently readable, only occasionally requiring some stamina.

Later in the book he brings this complicated subject up to date with a chapter on modern investigations including modern stigmatic and "skin-writing" (as exhibited by Eleonora Zugun, the Romanian poltergeist girl, and by some claiming to be reincarnations) but omitting the Italian UFO stigmatic Georgio Bongiovanni (see **FT96:37-38**).

As to what stigmata might mean… it's complicated! But Smeyers is a reliable and balanced guide, steering us through the wealth of argumentation and interpretations that spin off each case. This book should be in every public library – not just because it shines a light into a forgotten corner of the history of religion in society, but because its price is a bit much for any private reader.

★★★★★

The laughing gas pioneer

This depiction of physician Thomas Beddoes is scrupulously researched and an engaging read

Free Radicals

How a Group of Romantic Experimenters Gave Birth to Psychedelic Science

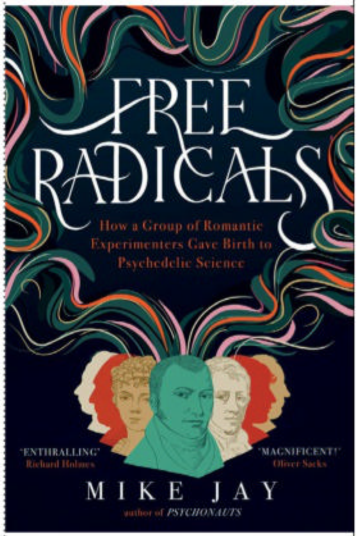
Mike Jay

Yale University Press 2025

Pb, 416pp. £11.99, ISBN 9780300282610

A new book from Mike Jay is always worthy of attention, even if *Free Radicals* is an updated version of an earlier title, 2009's *The Atmosphere of Heaven: The Unnatural Experiments of Dr Beddoes and His Sons of Genius.*

The subtitle of this new edition is clearly a nod to Jay's last two books, *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic* (2021) and *Psychonauts: Drugs and the Making of the Modern Mind* (2024) – and a canny ploy from his publishers to attract recent converts to Jay's books to an earlier title on a related theme.


FREE RADICALS
How a Group of Romantic Experimenters Gave Birth to Psychedelic Science
'ENTHRALLING' Richard Holmes
'MAGNIFICENT' Oliver Sacks
MIKE JAY
author of PSYCHONAUTS

Free Radicals is emblematic of Jay's work, illustrating his enviable ability to transform scrupulous historical research into clear and engaging prose. He also has a winning habit of shaping his books around fascinating yet relatively unheralded characters. Here, his focus is the effervescent physician Thomas Beddoes (1760-1808) and the circle of poets, dreamers and doctors pulled into his energetic orbit.

Beddoes has traditionally been depicted by historians of medicine as a failure: a supporter of doomed radical causes and wrong-headed medical theories, and all too easily distractable.

In Jay's depiction Beddoes is more of an interdisciplinary researcher: his voracious reading informing the range of pamphlets he raced into print. His political views, shaped by the initial possibilities of the French Revolution, result in his attempts to apply new chemical discoveries to improve the life of the poorest in society.

Hence Beddoes's move from Oxford University to Bristol to create the Pneumatic Institution, where newly discovered gases, he believed, could be used to treat the respiratory illnesses of the city's poor.

Although his treatments initially had positive effects, one particular gas – nitrous oxide, isolated at the Institute by the young Humphry Davy – had more immediate consequences on Beddoes and his circle than on his patients. The giddy, exhilarating effects of this new "laughing gas" had Beddoes's poet friends Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey grasping for superlatives, attempting to capture in words the delirious sensations they fleetingly experienced.

Hence then, the subtitle for this book. However, *Free Radicals* covers a wider range than this tagline suggests. It skilfully charts the life of Beddoes and his friends in the charged political climate at the turn of the 19th century, but also makes important points on the nature of scientific "discovery", explaining why contemporary medical theories prevented Beddoes and colleagues from realising the anæsthetic qualities of nitrous oxide.

It also concludes on a suitably fortean point, noting that the precise cause of nitrous oxide's "gaseous epiphanies" remains as mysterious to us today as to Beddoes and co in the early 1800s.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★

The Year

An ecology of the Zodiac

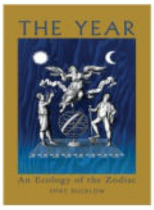
Spike Bucklow

Reaktion Books 2025

Hb, 232pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781836390787

European astronomy and astrology sprang from Babylonian observations of the heavens – observations appropriated and refined by the Greeks, who co-opted Egyptian astronomical wisdom.

Most of the Western world has had four seasons for more than 3,000 years (indigenous cultures identify between two and nine). The year was divided into months before 1100 BC, and before 400 BC the stars on the Sun's journey through the sky were grouped into 12 constellations: the zodiac. The zodiac, then, is an assertion of a connection between the distant reaches of the cosmos and terrestrial change; between (in the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic world view), the constant realm of being (the heavens), and the changing realm of becoming (encompassing the sublunar world). It implies that real change is by nature cyclical rather than linear.



The word "zodiac" means "circle of little animals" which, argues Spike Bucklow in this luxuriant cornucopia of a book, makes zodiacal understanding an essentially ecological understanding. It's an ambitious thesis. Its defence demands an indictment of the (very modern) division between science and mythology, an imaginative exposition of the biological tropes encoded in astrological belief, and an interrogation of the nature of metaphor itself.

Some examples. The zodiacal sign for March-April is the ram, Aries. Each sign is ruled by a planet or other celestial body. In the case of Aries, that is Mars, the god of war. Is there anything martial about early spring? Yes, says Bucklow: daffodil leaves "force their way out of bare earth like the spear tips of ancient Greek Spartoi". The creatures that appear now "exhibit Martial courage".

The sign for June-July is the crab, Cancer, a dweller in the tidal zone between land and sea. Cancer is under the sovereignty of the Moon, the tugger of tides, and many biological phenomena of this period in the summer are synchronised with the moods of the Moon: the vertical migrations of plankton populations, for instance, the spawning of coral, and the hatching of nightjars at full moon.

This may sound fanciful to the dyed-in-the-wool metaphor-phobe. But Bucklow makes an alluring case. Zodiacal thought, he contends, is "profoundly embedded" in an understanding of Nature that includes – well, everything, including human nature. We urgently need, in a world of splintered, atomised, balkanised understanding, all the holism we can get. "I hope," he writes, "that the apparently odd couple – the traditional zodiac and modern ecology – can hint at the depth of our connections with nature and our own ever-shifting place in the world." It can.

Charles Foster

★★★★

The Invisible Dimension

Spirit Beings, Ghosts and the Afterlife

Matthew D Arnold

Anamchara Books 2024

Pb, 424pp, £23, ISBN 9781625249081

The Coming of a Cloud

A True Testimony to a Secret Visit – from Christ

Christine Jones

Troubador Publishing 2025

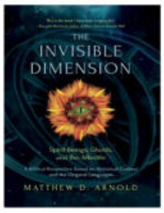
Pb, 160pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781836281887

Both these books concern Christian approaches to the hereafter, the nature of spiritual presences and the question of whether spiritual beings can interact with the living. Both books offer positive answers, but from diametrically different standpoints, one based upon biblical analysis and the other from lived experience.

The Invisible Dimension is a work of impressive scholarship by Matt Arnold, editor of the *Christian Parapsychologist* published by the Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. Examining some of the long-running arguments among Christians about the nature of spirits and post-mortem existence (disputation which has

been going on far longer than the Victorian “war between science and theology”), Arnold endeavours to identify what the Bible actually says about ghosts, angels and demons, the vexed theological question of communications with the departed.

His approach to extracting the most accurate or plausible reading from Scripture is to apprehend meaning from the linguistic context of the time, helping determine what key words and phrases meant or intended when first written down. This is a sound approach when construing legal texts, and when applied to key Old and New Testament verses concerning spirits and the afterlife helps illuminate many otherwise impenetrable or apparently contradictory aspects. From this he also assesses whether scriptural support exists for later church doctrines such as Purgatory (understood more as a process rather than a place).



The Coming of a Cloud
Christine Jones

Covering many detailed historical and theological issues, this book will enlighten readers as to biblical perspectives on paranormal phenomena and help bring greater clarity to debates among Christians themselves. Altogether it constitutes a significant work of biblical exegesis.

Optimistically, in addition to proving a useful aid particularly for interested Christians, I hope this book may contribute to bridging the gap between paranormal researchers and many in the mainstream Churches which has grown over the past 50 years. Arnold effectively establishes Christianity ought to have no quarrel with ethically conducted psychical research. In doing so he addresses a number of the most common objections routinely and reflexively raised against investigators by certain fundamentalists, some of whom consider that even talking about psychic topics is tantamount to a gateway to damnation.

In contrast, *The Coming of the Cloud* by Christine Jones is a very different and highly personal work by a lady convinced she is receiving divine messages, mostly symbolic, directly from Christ and the Holy Spirit, which she has felt compelled to record. It is a highly subjective book lacking corroboration, but I see no reason to doubt the sincerity of its author, nor any purpose in challenging her claims of undergoing 100 spontaneous visions of a remarkable kind. Demonstrating that religious experiences continue to flourish today, this book may inspire or comfort others encountering similar phenomena.

Alan Murdie

Arnold ★★★★★

Jones ★★★

Prospero’s Isle

Gerald Gardner and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man

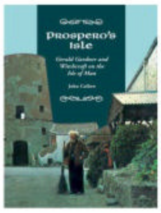
John Callow

Rose Ankh Publishing 2025

Hb, 282pp, £30, no ISBN, roseankhpublishing.com

In the spring of 1951, just as the tourist season was about to begin, an elderly gentleman with a somewhat eccentric appearance arrived at Cecil Williamson’s Witchcraft Museum near Castletown on the Isle of Man. Gerald Gardner, founder of Wicca, had arrived to take up his post as resident witch. *Prospero’s Isle* is an account of Gardner’s life from relocating to the Isle of Man up until his death in 1964, and of the history of the Museum in the years after.

Once settled into his new role, Gardner began to build. After tensions between the two men led to him taking over the museum from Williamson, he remodelled the exhibition to better reflect his own view of witchcraft. At the same time as he was building his business, he further developed his religion of Wicca, redefining the image of the witch; an evil, possibly satanic maleficent was reinvented as a wise woman, herbalist and healer. His museum presented Wicca as a peaceful nature religion with ancient roots.



In 1954 Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, a largely well-received book that made him a local celebrity. Sacks of mail arrived daily and he began to initiate people as witches. One initiate, Monique Wilson, became a favourite of Gardner’s and the inheritor of both the Museum and Gardner’s private collections. His former home, The Witches’ Mill, was left to William Worrall, a friend and collaborator. Gardner died whilst on a sea journey and was buried at the nearest port, Tunis. Wilson and her husband took possession of the Museum, but hubris intervened. Styling herself “Queen of the Witches” was not well received by other practitioners, while undercover reporters from the *News of the World* alleged that her coven practised Satanic rituals. While Wicca thrived and spread internationally, the Museum fell into decline. Exhibits were scattered; reclaimed by their owners or sold, some to Ripley’s Believe it or Not.

This history of the rise and fall of the Museum of Witchcraft, and the parallel rise of Wicca is timely and exceptionally readable. One gets a real sense of the people involved in Gardner’s development of the new religion. The book contains many photographs, often in colour, that enhance the text. A wonderful account of Gardner’s last years and the controversies in early Wicca.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★★

Bodypedia

A brief compendium of human anatomical curiosities

Adam Taor

Princeton University Press 2025

Hb, 216pp, £12.99, ISBN 9780691256788

As this compendium of anatomical curiosities, which ranges from the acetabulum (hip socket) to the zygomaticus major (facial muscles), eloquently illustrates, the human body is truly amazing. But Taor does more than catalogue our little-known bodily oddities: he delves into the stories associated with each tissue or organ, which are often more curious than the anatomy.

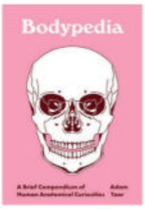
For example, John Hunter, a leading 18th-century surgeon and anatomist, identified the eponymous canal in the thigh: a tunnel for blood vessels and nerves. Biologically Hunter’s canal is not really that curious. But Hunter was also convinced that syphilis and gonorrhoea were the same disease. So, in 1767 he pushed a needle dripping in pus collected from a sex worker with gonorrhoea into a penis. The man developed symptoms of syphilis and gonorrhoea. So, Hunter felt he was right. In fact, they’re different diseases. The sex worker was infected with both syphilis and gonorrhoea. Some historians argue that Hunter died from syphilis and that he may have been “the experiment’s pus-pricked subject”.

Taor adds colour to some fortean favourites including Mary Toft, an 18th-century illiterate servant who convinced several leading doctors that she had given birth to rabbits. James Douglas helped uncover the deception and gave his name to a pouch in the female abdomen.

The phrenic nerves run from the neck down each side of the body to the diaphragm under your lungs. Hiccups can arise from irritation of the phrenic nerves. Forteans will recall that Charles Osborne holds the world record for hiccups: 68 years.

Taor also covers the biological basis of simulacra corner and Diana Duyser’s toasted cheese sandwich with its supposed image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Part of the brain called the fusiform face area seems to be essential in facial recognition. The area activates when we see facial pareidolia.

Clear, informative illustrations support and augment the text, and Taor frequently delves into etymology. For instance, ancient physicians felt that the biceps’ movement under the skin resembled a mouse twitching. The Latin for mouse is ‘mus’ – hence muscle. The medical name for hiccups is singultus; from the Latin for “to catch your breath while sobbing”. Taor also infuses *Bodypedia* with humour and particularly puns. My favourite: Taor describes Claudius’s murder of Hamlet père as “A peculiarly Bard-ass murder”.



As these few examples show, *Bodypedia* is a fascinating, educational, charming and hugely entertaining book.

Mark Greener

★★★★★

The birth of Glastonbury

Andy Roberts discovers how John Michel, Geoffrey Ashe and others created the mythos of Somerset's esoteric town and landscape

Earthing The Dragon

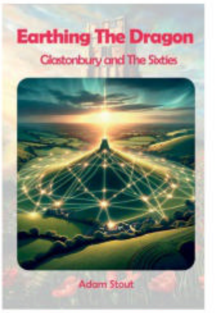
Glastonbury and the Sixties

Adam Stout

Green Magic Publishing 2025
Pb, 200pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781915580283

It's almost certain that few attendees at this or any year's Glastonbury festival truly understand its rich and complex history. Most festival-goers, understandably, are focused on the music, the spectacle and the sense of community the event fosters.

However, if they knew the history behind the festival and the landscape it is set in, and how Glastonbury town grew from a small village into a beacon of counterculture and spiritual exploration, they might see the festival in a completely different light. In fact – note to Michael Eavis – a copy of this book should really come bundled with each festival ticket; it's that essential.



In fewer than 200 pages, Adam Stout has done a remarkable job of examining and distilling the numerous historical, archæological, sociological and spiritual influences which conspired, wittingly and unwittingly, to forge Glastonbury into the "New Age" pilgrimage centre it is today.

One of the book's highlights is how Stout draws attention to certain key figures who were instrumental in establishing Glastonbury's connection to New Age and countercultural thought.

Chief among these figures is writer John Michel whose interest in myths, legends, UFOs and telluric energies first drew him to Glastonbury in the early Sixties, following which he wrote a series of books which led the burgeoning hippie culture to see and experience the town and its surrounding landscape as a locus of deep spiritual significance, imbued with Arthurian legend, flying saucers, esoteric knowledge and ancient mysteries. Geoffrey Ashe, a lesser known but no less important influence on the growth of Glastonbury as a place of power and pilgrimage, is also examined and hopefully readers will be encouraged to seek out Ashe's books too. Michel and Ashe's imaginative and speculative interpretations of Glastonbury's lore and legend didn't always bear close scrutiny – perhaps the LSD amplified their message! – but they did help spread the word that Glastonbury was the place to be and was much more accessible than more exotic spiritual locations such as India or Nepal.

Of course Glastonbury is best known for its festival but the event, in 1970, was little more than an attempt to emulate the large rock festivals that were springing up across Britain. It was a financial flop but the second event, in 1971, the Glastonbury Fair (*not* Fayre), took on board the hippie ethos and the site of the pyramid stage was determined by dowsing and its dimensions based on those of the Egyptian pyramids. Flying saucers were seen above the Tor and spiritual teachings of all persuasions were on offer to the hippie mystics who attended the event, many of whom remained and settled in the area.

But Glastonbury, in all its forms, didn't just spring into life in the mid-Sixties. By way of the Glastonbury back story, Stout examines the curious case of Wellesley Tudor-Pole, who bought and developed the Chalice Well in 1959, drawing future New Age movers and shakers like Peter and Eileen Caddy to what would become the spiritual healing centre there. Caddy, of course, went on to found Findhorn but not before he stated that Tudor-Pole was the guardian of Glastonbury, urging him to prepare for the huge influx of young people who would soon descend on the area.

The concept of earth energy lines or dragon lines is central to any understanding of Glastonbury's lore and legend, principally John Michel's notion of *lung mei*, a network of invisible paths of the dragon criss-crossing the Earth's surface. Nascent hippie mover and shaker John Esam linked these dragon lines to places in the British landscape and Michel "saw" one such line between Glastonbury Tor and St Michael's Mount in Cornwall, an idea mooted some 30 years earlier by occultist Dion Fortune.

Suddenly people were experiencing "lines of force" everywhere in the Somerset landscape and geomancy, the art of linking random geographic location with esoteric powers, became a key part of the Glastonbury mythos, a new way of meaningfully interpreting the landscape.

Another Glastonbury old-timer, Kathleen Maltwood, is also given an airing. Maltwood discovered (or invented, depending on your level of scepticism) the Glastonbury Zodiac, claiming that the Somerset landscape around Glastonbury contained a vast astrological effigy or "Temple of the Stars", formed by natural features including hills, rivers and roads, which together depicted the 12 signs of the zodiac on a gigantic scale – several miles across.

Such "terrestrial zodiacs" remain intangible but Maltwood's book *Temple of the Stars* and its spin-offs drew many nascent hippie psychogeographers to settle in the area, getting their boots muddy, and seeking out the zodiac forms in the landscape.

Add to this heady brew the legend that Jesus himself once visited Glastonbury, leaving the Glastonbury Thorn as evidence, and Glastonbury shines as one of Britain's major spiritual beacons.

Stout's knowledge and enthusiasm shines out from every page, making the book an invaluable addition to anyone's Glastonbury bookshelf.

★★★★★

Exploring the Paranormal

Miracles, Magic and the Mysterious

R Alan Streett

William B Eerdmans 2024
Pb, 224pp, £19.99, ISBN 9780802884534

Many people might imagine the life of a biblical scholar as tedium laced with outworn piety. This memoir reveals another side of the story. Streett's is not the record of a hymn-singing lad called to profess the Gospel for a living. He occupies a unique niche in the academic corner of North Atlantic evangelical Christianity where conjugating Greek verbs can coexist with curiosity about conjuring of sundry types. This book explains how he got there.

EXPLORING THE
PARANORMAL
Miracles, Magic, and the Mysterious
R. ALAN STREETT

A cunning father with wart-removing power is Streett's earliest witness to the invisible. A school baseball injury leads to experiments with psychic healing, and the Vietnam war makes the unknown world of seminary education a plausible career step. A black suit, cribbed Billy Graham sermons and heavy drinking augur an Elmer Gantry future, but fascination with hypnosis, séances and altered states charts an evangelical road rarely travelled.

Streett's narrative follows a breadcrumb path of meetings with one remarkable person after another and encounters with a host of organisations and people; Dennis Bennet, Edgar Cayce, Jeane Dixon, Arthur Ford, Kathryn Kuhlman and James Pike expand his library and his perspective. He is obsessed with Ted Swager, ill-fated medium and car salesman. Every page manifests the spiritual ferment of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, when boosters and busters of America's alternative altars competed for a share of the mainstream market.

Some will find Streett's paranormal too domesticated. Others will bristle at his debunking. His Protestant net misses Catholicism's crying statues, bleeding hosts and stigmatists, not to mention its premodern magic and alchemy. The book is an unvarnished account of one mind in search for what is real.

Peter A Huff

★★★

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

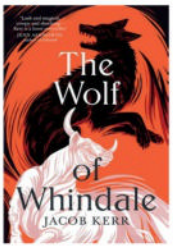
DAVID V BARRETT **ROUNDS UP THE LATEST TITLES FROM THE WORLD OF SPECULATIVE AND FANTASTIC FICTION**

The Wolf of Whindale

Jacob Kerr

Serpent's Tail 2025

Hb, 336pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781800811522



The Wolf of Whindale is Jacob Kerr's second novel set in the county of Northalbion – a version of Northumberland where myths and folklore have reality – and is very different from his *The Green Man of Eshwood Hall* (**FT430:57**). It's set in a mining village in 1845, where a body has been found, ripped apart by, apparently, a great wolf. Mine worker Caleb – a remarkably well-read young man – is physically punished and banished for crossing a picket line during a strike. Badly injured and having to make his own way across the hills, he encounters the wolf – and later the truth about the wolf. It's not always an easy read, in part because of the large amount of dialect, not all of which is obvious from the context (though on reaching the end of the book I discovered a helpful glossary, unhelpfully not mentioned in the contents), but also because of the cruelty of man to man – including Caleb's own deeply-believing harshly Christian mother. But it's a satisfying tale where you readily accept the supernatural elements as they appear.

The Hounding

Xenobe Purvis

Penguin Books 2025

Hb, 272pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781529154504

From a wolf to dogs – or are they? Xenobe Purvis's *The Hounding* (a brilliant title) begins with a mob of village people coming out to confront the five orphaned granddaughters of an elderly, almost blind farmer; the remainder of the novel shows how events led to that point. Aged from the late teens down to around six, the Mansfield sisters have developed a strong bond, almost a secret language between themselves, that sets them apart from everyone else in their early 18th-century Oxfordshire village. Pete Darling, who ferries villagers across the Thames between drinking in the alehouse, and who claims he once saw an angel, feels uncomfortable around the girls and starts spreading a story that he saw them turn into dogs and run along the ground. In exactly the same way that an unpopular old woman would find herself being blamed for every crop failure or stillborn calf, the girls become the focus of attention and gossip in the village: "Every grievance found its way back to the sisters, it seemed." Each chapter is from the viewpoint of a different character – Pete himself; the wonderfully-named Temperance, the landlady who doesn't touch a drop herself; young Thomas who comes to help with the harvest at the Mansfields' farm, who is entranced by the oldest girl – except for the girls themselves; their story, inevitably, is always told by others. Inspired by a letter in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in 1701 about barking girls, this is a powerful and all too real tale, and an outstanding first novel.

Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined

Edited by Anna Milon and Rory Waterman

Five Leaves Publications 2025

Pb, 294pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781915434289

Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined is part of an academic project at Nottingham Trent University. Lincolnshire is Britain's second-largest county, but how much do any of us know about its folklore? For this anthology, writers and poets were asked to choose a folk tale or aspect of folklore from Lincolnshire, then use it as a springboard for whatever they wanted to write, in whatever style. Some are historical, some present-day. Inevitably (as in any anthology) this makes for something of a mixed bag – and the stories are stronger than the poems, some of which are rather too experimental. Personal favourites: a ghost story by Philippa East based on a tale about Markby church, where people have for generations knocked nails into the church door then run widdershins around the church to summon a ghost; a crime story by Anne Zouroudi about Tom Otter, hanged for viciously murdering his heavily pregnant bigamous second wife – but did he?; and a quite compelling story by Nick Triplow about the feud between a gypsy family and a local crime family. A fascinating collection demonstrating both the versatility and the ongoing power of folk tales.

Grave Undertakings

Suzi Quatro

New Haven Publishing Ltd 2025

Pb, 198pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781915975119

A novel by rock icon Suzi Quatro, who collects people's wishes for their own epitaphs – how could I resist? But the novel is actually about six students taking a psychology course, which is more like a group psychotherapy session, and they don't seem to be studying anything else, or to interact with any of the other students at the college. And over the few weeks of the course they all end up sleeping with each other, including their professor. He finally asks them for their self-epitaphs in the last pages of the novel. By far the best part of the book is the appendix, a dozen pages of Suzi Quatro's collection of the desired epitaphs of actors and others, which really is fascinating. The novel? Sadly not. And someone really should have proof-read the book; there are horrendous punctuation errors on every single page.

Vanishing World

Sayaka Murata

Granta Books 2025

Hb, 240pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781803511177

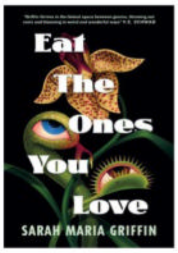
Sayaka Murata's *Vanishing World* has an intriguing premise: that artificial insemination has become so commonplace that no one has sex any more, even for pleasure. But Amane was conceived in the old-fashioned way, and as she reaches sexual maturity she realises that she too wants to have physical sex – something so far out of society's norms that she's considered a serious oddity. People do still marry, but it's solely for companionship and sharing; sex between a married couple is seen as incest. All of this would be an interesting background for a novel, but the problem is that this is the foreground; there's an awful lot of introspection and repetition of the basic ideas, and very little plot.

Eat the Ones You Love

Sarah Maria Griffin

Titan Books 2025

Pb, 320pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781803366760



In contrast, Sarah Maria Griffin's third novel *Eat the Ones You Love* is as astonishingly creative as her first two, *Spare and Found Parts* (**FT369:65**) and *Other Words for Smoke* (**FT379:65**), and very different from both of them. Having split up with her fiancé and moved back with her parents in a Dublin suburb, Shell takes a job in a flower shop in the rundown 1970s shopping centre she's known for years. She's instantly smitten by the shop owner, Neve, but doesn't know that Neve has a secret, dark relationship with an orchid – not just a pretty flower, but a plant with intelligence and will and an agenda of its own, a plant that is prepared to kill and eat – a plant that Neve calls Baby, but that is growing and spreading around the shopping centre, and sees and hears everything. Exploring the service passages behind the shops with a friend, Shell touches a tendril of the plant, and it works its way into her; the next morning she wakes to find buds on one hand and on her cheek, buds that quickly become flowers... It's beautifully written and genuinely scary; perhaps most disturbing of all, although Shell is the main third-person viewpoint character, the plant's first-person voice, confident and malevolent, frequently intrudes on the page.

Horror homages

YouTuber and film critic graduates to a cinematic debut with the help of Kickstarter and numerous genre borrowings, while Guillermo del Toro reanimates a Gothic classic in his own inimitable style

Shelby Oaks

Dir Chris Stuckmann, US 2025
In cinemas

It's probably fair to say that *Shelby Oaks*, the directorial debut of YouTuber Chris Stuckmann, which he also wrote and produced, has divided audiences and critics alike. This is ironic in itself, as it is very much a film of two halves. The first mostly follows the found footage format and is full of intrigue and spine-tingling potential, while the second adheres to a more traditional, but ultimately less fulfilling path which soon descends into a slightly derivative, cliché-ridden romp. The *Guardian* ruthlessly labelled it, "junky Halloween horror [which] delivers zero scares", which might be a little harsh. As a noted film critic in his own right, you would think Stuckmann would know his way around a movie set. And he does. Let's face it, it would be unthinkable for someone with his background to produce a complete turkey. And despite that *Guardian* review, there are scares aplenty, proving once again that movies don't need big Hollywood budgets to be effective.

> *It proves movies don't need big Hollywood budgets to be effective*

Shelby Oaks is a fictional town in Ohio. After a spate of mysterious disappearances, it is abandoned and left to rot along with its funfair and local jail, once the stomping ground of ex-con Wilson Miles. When a paranormal group heads there to investigate some ghostly goings-on, things go south pretty quickly and most of their number come to sticky ends, all except Riley Brennan (Sarah Durn) who vanishes, prompting her elder sister Mia (Camille Sullivan) to devote herself to the search. In the process, she uncovers a history of childhood trauma involving her sister and a demonic stalker, which inexorably leads back to Miles, who is either the embodiment of evil or a vessel for a spooky pagan deity.

The film's history dates back to 2021, when Stuckmann was signed by Paper Street Pictures to write and direct a movie based on an online marketing campaign involving a series of short found footage films following the adventures of a fictional ghost-hunting crew called the Paranormal Paranoids (the group that comes a cropper in *Shelby Oaks*). Initial funding was attained through a Kickstarter campaign, and it soon became the most-funded horror movie on the platform at the time. A version premiered at the prestigious Fantasia International Film Festival in the summer of 2024, where it caught the eye of production and distribution company Neon (*Parasite*, *Longlegs*, *The Monkey*) who handed Stuckmann some extra cash to 'refine' his film. Even though found footage only makes up a small percentage of the running time, *Shelby Oaks* will inevitably draw comparisons with *The Blair Witch Project*, which is a bit like comparing every sci-fi movie ever made to *Star Wars*. That isn't to say there aren't similarities, but there are also identifiable elements of *Rosemary's Baby*, *Hereditary*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and a slew of other genre staples as Stuckmann flexes his muscles and shows off his encyclopædic knowledge of horror cinema. The problem is – as with so many other debuts – *Shelby Oaks* doesn't simply borrow but sometimes just pays homage to Stuckmann's favourite films, leaving him caught in a weird twilight zone where he is simultaneously guilty of not doing enough and trying to do too much.

The premise is full of potential, some of the acting is superb, and as the plot unfolds there are some genuinely frightening moments. Unfortunately, *Shelby Oaks* runs out of steam in the final third and by the time the end credits roll we are in very familiar territory. However, all things considered it's a solid debut. If this was Stuckmann's school report it would probably include the phrase "could do better"; and I have no doubt that given the opportunity and a decent budget, he will.

Chris Saunders

★★★☆☆

Frankenstein

Dir Guillermo del Toro, US 2025
Streaming on Netflix

Guillermo del Toro's lifelong infatuation with monsters saturates his filmography, and with his adaptation of *Frankenstein*, the director fulfils a dream that he simultaneously hoped and feared would come true ever since he first saw James Whale's iconic adaptation of Mary Shelley's much-adapted novel as a child.

Del Toro approaches Shelley's work with a traditional structure and setting for the story, imbuing it with a wistful sense of melancholy, and offers the most ambitious adaption since Kenneth Branagh's operatically bloated attempt in 1994.

Oscar Isaac's portrayal of Victor Frankenstein is brooding and intense without going into actual mad scientist territory, making Victor both alluring and repugnant as he suffers at the hands of his own whims and failings as both a scientist and a human being. Mia Goth embodies Elizabeth with subtle but determined integrity, and possessing an otherworldly essence that makes her interest in both Victor and his creature equally believable. The innocence and kindness of her character are portrayed with a depth that does not come at the cost of her intellect, all the while emphasising the inherent tragedy of her character arc. Jacob Elordi is a revelation as the creature; the fact that he was a replacement borders on baffling, as it is difficult to see anyone else in the role after witnessing his portrayal, the delicate tragedy and abundant humanity he weaves into his performance becoming the reanimated heart of the film.

Dan Laustsen's cinematography creates a world that is grandiose

and haunting, drawing parallels with another del Toro effort, 2015's *Crimson Peak*, which also had Laustsen behind the lens. Kate Hawley's costume design is ethereal and decadent, something mirrored in Tamara Deverell's production design, providing the film's visual style with details every bit as lavish as one would expect from a team of creatives enabled by del Toro.

It would be out of character for the Mexican filmmaker to shy away from gore, and it is portrayed with an attention to anatomical detail that should delight a certain subset of horror fans; however, it is not gruesome enough to make the film inaccessible for more casual viewers.

While the film is confident in its pacing, it does at times linger too long on individual set pieces; the visual aspects are remarkable, but the narrative gears that grind beneath the surface exhibit signs of fatigue.

A well-realised and evocative adaptation, del Toro's *Frankenstein* is perhaps the most worthwhile adaptation since the classic monsters moved to colour. It's not without its problems, as the production at times feels as hampered by its source material as it is empowered by the filmmakers loving attempts to retell it; but these issues do not detract from the film ultimately being both a haunting dream and a beautiful nightmare.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

Scurry

Dir Luke Sparke, Australia 2024
On digital platforms

There are films where our heroes find themselves in extraordinary situations and must extricate themselves such as *Fall* and the Ryan Renolds thriller *Buried*. Then there are films in which our heroes are in an ordinary situation but are terrorised by an external force, such as *Cujo* or the recent Idris Elba flick *Beast*. *Scurry* combines the two.

Our heroes are Mark and Kate (Jamie Costa and Emalia, respectively) who find themselves trapped in an underground tunnel after what they initially believe is an earthquake. However, they soon learn that an unknown subterranean species has broken out onto the surface and is destroying civilisation. All of which means they not only have to find their way through an incredibly narrow tunnel, but also that they must fight off attacks by the giant bugs.

The optimum running time for hokum of this sort is 80 minutes. There's only so long one can put up with the silliness and, as with reading bad detective novels, ultimately one only keeps going to find out what happens in the end. Unfortunately, *Scurry* goes on for nearly 100 minutes, being padded out with interminable scenes of Kate and, particularly, Mark sharing their backstories with each other… and boy do they have a mountain of issues. We don't want to know how they get on with their wife or their sister: what we want is to see cave-ins, giant chasms and some man-on-bug punch ups.

It would be unfair to say the film offers none of that, because it does. It's been done before, but there are the requisite scenes of finding equipment, losing equipment, dropping equipment and having to risk everything to go back for it. They encounter people they can't help and people who would help them but can't. There is even the obligatory *Poseidon Adventure*-style flooded passageway. Punctuating all this are occasional encounters with the creatures.

As I say, at a lean, fast-paced 80 minutes this kind of B-movie creature feature can be tremendously entertaining, and while this one does deliver a certain amount of what's required it overstays its welcome by trying to develop its characters far beyond what is necessary.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Radiance Films are spoiling us lately with *Malpertuis* (1971) on Blu-ray and *Daughters of Darkness* (1971) in sumptuous 4K UHD. Both were first-time watches for me, and were refreshing reminders that European Gothic cinema of the early Seventies was (and is) a strange, intoxicating pleasure.

Adapted from Jean Ray's novel and directed by Harry Kümel, *Malpertuis* sees a young sailor return to his ancestral home, only to be drawn into a surreal web of family secrets, shifting identities and crumbling mythologies. A bleary-eyed Orson Welles plays the bed-ridden, control-freak father, but it's Susan Hampshire who resonates most, playing multiple parts. The generous extras share how challenging that was for her. Yet it's quite astonishing how different she feels in each role… and how frightening. Not since *Black Narcissus* have I been so unnerved by a woman's eye-make up. The house itself (the Malpertuis of the title) is a decadent, suffocating labyrinth, with a story that slithers out, rather than unfolds. It's a heavy, sometimes incomprehensible experience, yet the art design, atmosphere and the central idea, which I won't spoil, is fascinating. The head-spinning ending is a particular treat. Radiance's Blu-ray does a fine job of conveying the character and colour, but also, the somehow 'roomy claustrophobia' of a sprawling house that feels both huge and tiny, all at once.

The newspapers scream: "Vampire killer at Large!"

I really liked *Malpertuis*, but I straight-up loved *Daughters of Darkness*. Also directed by Kümel, it's a vampire film that would double-bill better with Romero's *Martin*, than Hammer's *Dracula*. The film's unique energy is felt right from the opening sex scene on a train, where two young newlyweds declare how much they don't love one another – which makes them 'a perfect match'. Then, on a day trip to Bruges (where newspapers scream: "Vampire Killer at Large!") they see the corpse of a woman, drained of blood. She's disgusted with his reaction. "It gave you pleasure. You enjoyed seeing that girl's dead body." "And you enjoyed telling me," he says. Into this already strange relationship steps someone even stranger: the beautiful Countess Bathory and her assistant. They arrive in the seaside hotel where the couple are staying, the only other guests. She sets her sights on the newlyweds, and what follows is more death waltz than love triangle. It's a visually ravishing film, with a hypnotic performance from Delphine Seyrig as the Countess. The story it tells, about power, sexuality, and destructive relationships, feels way less dated than many other vampire films of the time. And the ending? One of the best, and most resonant I've seen in a while. Radiance's release makes the popping colours and deep shadows feel wonderfully natural: the hotel lobby looks as though you could walk into it.

These two strange films pull you into another world that, for two hours, feels real, no matter how fantastic the events within it.

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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The Horror of Toilets

Reading Laura Mauro's "Japanese Toilet Ghosts" [**FT459:30-35**], reminded me of a less well known fear in the Western world, which –according to the modern rabbinical Internet resource site *TheTorah.com* – is "a source of horror to many Jewish children".

This curious situation is particularly intense during *Nittel* (Christmas Eve), a period known as '*Nittel Nacht*' since the late 16th century. Amid the traditional observances, some Jewish households in Europe would read from the antisemitic satires of the life of Jesus known as *Toledots* of which there were many versions. Somehow, the 'toilet fear' evolved out of the 'lampooning' (at family gatherings) of the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus at this time, in particular stories that mention all sorts of 'pollution' that defile his magical or religious integrity.

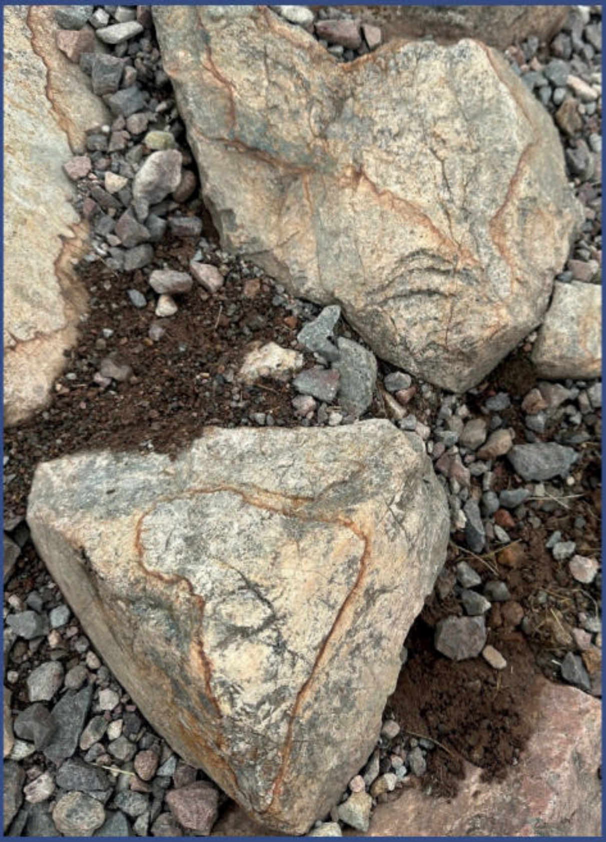
In a general overview of the 'Nittel horror' at *The Torah website* (https://www.thetorah.com/article/nittel-nacht-an-inverted-christmas-with-toledot-yeshu) Shai Alleson-Gerberg's article cites from a historical review of *Toledot* variants by Marc Shapiro, who refers to "writings of Jewish converts to Christianity that the image of Jesus creeping through the latrines on Christmas Eve was so ingrained and frightening to Jews in the early modern period that it caused them, and especially children, to avoid visits to the privy on Nittel", particularly for fear "that the hanged one (*talui*) does not pull you in."

This 'pollution' takes different forms in different historical sources. The *Toledot Yeshu* (1705) – one of the most inflammatory – suggest that Judas buried Jesus's body "in a cellar with chamber pots and excrement", which seems, in turn, to reverse a Talmudic dictum: "Whoever mocks the words of the Sages is punished with boiling excrement". Other sources (from around 1613/1644 refer to a magical battle between Judas and Jesus in mid-air – see my article on that aerial battle in **FT393:46-51** (May 2020) – tell that Jesus fell into a privy, after which he was pulled out by his hair and dragged through all the latrines to taint him. (This defiling is intended to destroy all the magic Yeshu is supposed to have stolen from the Temple as the ineffable spells would only work with purity).

Although these scholars acknowledge that the Toledots say nothing about Jesus (as a defiled magician) coming back on Christmas Eve and crawling through sewers, they do point to a Talmudic tradition suggesting that Jesus was punished with boiling excrement. Others suggest that these stories – possibly vestiges of the original four-century-old oral variants – might have originated as parodies of Jesus's descent into Hell after his Resurrection.

Bob Rickard
London

SIMULACRA CORNER



Carl Bradbury-Proudlove noticed this simulacrum of South America on a rock when walking to Crinkle Crags in the Lake District. He adds: "I was then further surprised to notice that the rock just above it had a map of the United States!"

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Controlled waking

I'd like to share some thoughts on the belief that it is possible to wake up at a pre-determined time. I have experienced this myself several times. More than once, I have awoken and immediately glanced at my analogue watch, and the second hand was just moving off the pre-determined time. I have also woken early at the weekend, and decided to sleep again until say 8am, and lo and behold I've woken at 8 on the dot. This could be interpreted as a form of bias, as I don't recall all the times I didn't wake up at the "right" time, but trawling the Internet shows that it is widely believed to happen. And I think it is undoubtedly common for people to wake up around the same time every day, for example to get ready for work.

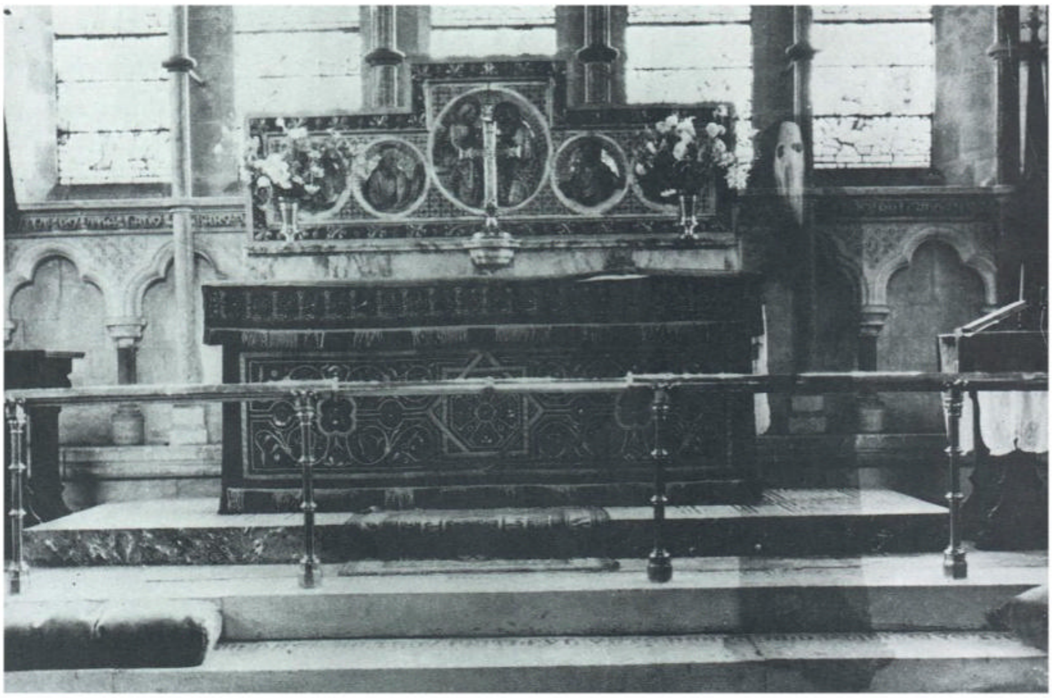
I see two interesting aspects to this. Firstly, although you may go to bed at a regular time, you don't actually know at what time you fall asleep. Depending on the sort of day you've had, or worries you may entertain, this could vary quite a bit. You may check the clock and it's 11pm, but you can only say that you fell asleep sometime after that, so how can you somehow commonly wake up around your regular time? The second point is that you are responding to a man-made artificial construct, rather than a natural one. Whereas in pre-industrial times you might wake up at daybreak, or on hearing the dawn chorus, perhaps prompted by your subconscious, now you are waking up according to a widely accepted but artificial system of time measurement, ignoring the fact that away from the equator sunrise occurs at a measurably earlier or later time each day, either side of your hemisphere's summer equinox. We also seem to adjust very quickly to the one-hour time difference resulting from putting our clocks forward or back twice a year, in countries which practise this.

It could be argued that in some cases, perhaps we are subconsciously responding to noises that occur around the time we want to wake up, such as the first bus of the day, or an early rising neighbour starting their car. The explanation may be that simple, but I think it deserves being researched.

In Victorian times, knocker-uppers would roam the streets and wake up paying customers. One, Mary Anne Smith, has been featured in the pages of our illustrious magazine, with her trusty peashooter. That's all very well, but how did *she* know to wake up on time?

Dave Miles
By email

The Newby Church Ghost... continued



ABOVE: The famous ghost photograph taken by Revd KF Lord in 1954 (or possibly 1961). **LEFT**: The Church of Christ the Consoler in the grounds of Newby Hall, North Yorkshire, where the photo was taken.

With reference to Matt Mills's letter (**FT462:66**) concerning the Newby church ghost photo, I can offer some further relevant information. Matt says that there is uncertainty about exactly when the photograph was taken, but I can state categorically (Well, almost! See below) that it was taken in 1954. I have found a quotation from Revd KF Lord himself that confirms this:

"I took the photograph in the summer of 1954 – July or August. The camera was a Rolleicord model V4. The film was Ilford FP2, I think – slowish film – and the camera was hand-held. This church is perhaps unusual in that the window in the west wall is enormous; it is of stained glass, and it is placed very high in the lofty wall. Thus there was a good deal of light, even for a slow film. The time of day was after tea – six pm or so – and the window would be flooded with light.

So far as I know the church was empty apart from a friend who was with me, but I can't be sure of this. The church was open for visitors throughout the summer. I didn't find the 'ghost' for some considerable time afterwards, probably because I didn't make a print from this particular negative. The print remained a family thing for a good many years until my wife took a copy of it to work and her boss passed it on to a friend of his who had contacts with *The People* newspaper."

This statement from Revd Lord is quoted in Graham J McEwan's book *Haunted Churches of England* (Robert Hale, 1989, p.61), with McEwan stating that Revd Lord had supplied him with the information. In addition, in a *Fortean Times* piece in September 2023 Roger J Morgan also stated that the photograph was taken in 1954, having been told this by Revd Lord's son. (See Roger J Morgan, 'Newby Church ghost', **FT435:67**). The photograph also appears in John Fairley & Simon Welfare's book *Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers* (Collins, 1984, pp.153-5), their information apparently coming from a family source, including that "Mr Lord had been appointed vicar of the parish and wanted some photographs of his church to send to some friends." This supports a 1954 date since Revd Lord moved to Newby church late in 1953.

However, in a letter to me dated 7 March 1972 Revd Lord wrote the following account:

"...I took the photograph myself – somewhere around 1961 – in my Parish Church. The camera in use had no double exposure device. I made prints sometime later and noticed the odd figure on one of them, but I did not think the matter remarkable enough to publish. It is not an easy matter to prove the existence of a ghost and there was no figure in evidence when I took the photograph. In August 1967, my wife lent a print to a friend. A reporter on a minor newspaper in the Manchester area saw this print by chance, borrowed it, and passed it to the editor of *The People*. They sent a staff photographer and a reporter out here post-haste. You will see by the delay that I had no intention of publishing the picture, but they were very pressing indeed and the 'ghost' appeared in their paper dated August 13th 1967 (Sunday) together with their own very colourful write-up. The condition I attached to their use of the picture was that they take the negative and first submit it to any authority of their own choosing to check for fake, film fault [or] processing fault. Thus, as their reporter says in his article, the negative went to the film manufacturers (Ilford) and to the staff of the *Amateur Photographer*. They said there was no evidence of film fault or fake."

I can't explain the discrepancy regarding the year the photograph was taken, other than to suggest that Revd Lord quite simply made a mistake. This tends to support the genuineness of the photograph since if he had hoaxed the whole thing, he would have been more careful to keep the details consistent through the years.

As noted above, there would appear to be more evidence that the photograph was taken in 1954 rather than in 1961. He does say "around 1961" which is only seven years out! He does also say that "The print remained a family thing for a good many years", which to me makes sense if it was 13 years before it saw the light of day rather than a mere seven. A total of 12 photographs (the total number of frames on the type of film he used) were taken with the Rolleicord, and only frame

five showed the figure by the altar. I consider that this shows that the image was not faked by Revd Lord, because had he been trying to fake a ghost photograph, he would have made more than one attempt, so that he could compare the results and choose the best one to show to people. He certainly wasn't in a hurry to do this either, because as he stated himself, he didn't look closely at the negatives for some time.

People have sometimes commented on the fact that the ghost photograph has been published in a horizontal format whereas the negatives from Revd Lord's camera were square. There is nothing strange or suspicious about this. Square negatives were commonly 'cropped' when being printed, if a horizontal or vertical format was required: the ability to do this was one of the advantages of the format. I do speak from experience because my husband (Colin Bord) and I used Rolleiflexes when we travelled around Britain photographing locations for our books in the 1970s and 1980s and Colin invariably printed them in either horizontal or vertical format since that is what publishers required.

I corresponded with Revd Lord from 1972 until just before his death in 2000, but never met him – although I almost did, late in the 1970s, as described in my own note published in **FT438:67**. On looking again through our voluminous correspondence, I came across a rather strange story he told me (2 Oct 1988), which I believe is published here for the first time. I don't know when this meeting took place, but I suspect not long before he told me about it.

"My wife and the home-based daughter Amanda were out with the dog for a short walk and they encountered the local blacksmith's wife who retailed the following. She had been talking to visitors returning from the Church and they asked her, as an evident local, about the ghost. It seems that friends of theirs, one wealthy Bradford woollen merchant and his wife, had taken a picture in this Church, somewhere about 1960 they said, and when the negs and prints came back from processing the picture of the ghost appeared on one print – a facsimile of the one we know of. The people telling the tale had both seen and been able to examine this print, and they alleged that it was no fairy tale.

I don't find this easy to credit. At one time the ghost was very small fry. The fact that I took the photo, and that I was the vicar and thus not in line for telling whoppers cut very little ice. But now, since the great god telly looked into things, together with the well established AC Clarke, to say nothing of the Home Office computer, it has an official existence. As you know, the print has been copied before. Now it looks as if it has been copied again! Either that or I really did dig up an actual spook."

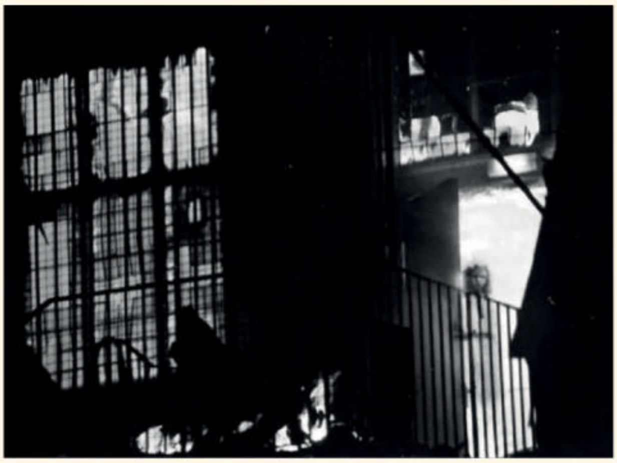
I did ask him if it would be possible for me to see this strange photograph, but he replied:

"I haven't heard any more about the second ghost picture, though I did encounter the aforesaid blacksmith's wife yesterday on my way back from the village shop. If I get any further clues I will let you know."

The only logical explanation is that the visitors were describing the actual ghost photograph taken by Revd Lord and so many years afterwards they were confused about what they had seen. But this seems unlikely if their date of "about 1960" is correct, since its first publication took place in 1967 with no one outside the family having seen it before then. It's all very strange. Maybe there are indeed two photographs of the Newby church ghost. Though so far as I know, the Bradford woollen merchant's photograph has never been publicised or published. If it really exists, to be able to compare the two would be wonderful and possibly enlightening. But this possibility has to remain in limbo unless or until someone rediscovers the second photograph.

However, in view of the continuing interest in the Newby church ghost, I think it is sensible to add this strange tale to the mix. Sadly, so much that has been published concerning Revd Lord's photograph is second-hand and often incorrect. In my own contributions to the debate I have tried to rely on first-hand information, often provided by Revd Lord himself, wherever possible.

Janet Bord
Wales



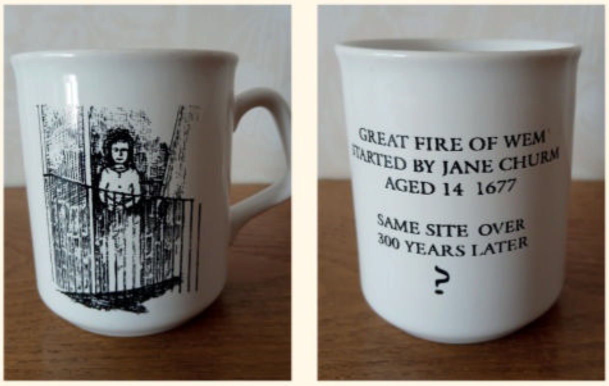
Jane Churm's ghost

I was fortunate to be involved in the investigation in 1996 of the notorious Wem Town Hall ghost photograph. As founder and chair of Parasearch, a regional ASSAP group, I visited the site, interviewed the photographer and workmen who subsequently worked in the burnt-out building who claimed it was haunted.

Wem Town Hall was burnt down on 19 November 1995. The incident was recorded by local photographer Tony O'Rahilly. He later claimed that one of the photographs appeared to depict the image of a young girl in the doorway of the burning building. It was soon claimed that this was the ghost of Jane Churm, who had started the Great Fire of Wem in 1677. The image was later proven to be fake after the source image of the alleged ghost girl was discovered to be copied from a postcard from 1922.

I recently came across a mug commemorating the fire of 1677 and what at the time, was considered to be ghost of Jane Churm in the burning building. An interesting depiction in ceramic of a famous ghostly image.

David Taylor
Halesowen, West Midlands



Alien Ointment

The circumstances surrounding the death of Zigmund Jan Adamski in 1980 (see **FT147:39, 242:33**) remain unexplained. It is an intriguing case, but it was the wild claim by some, including a sensationalist article in the *Sunday Mirror*, and comments about a possible link to the UFO phenomenon by West Yorkshire coroner James Turnbull, which led to the widely held belief that Mr Adamski was the result of an 'alien abduction gone wrong'.

There are many unanswered questions. How – and why – was his body dumped in broad daylight at the top of a pile of coal, next to a busy train station in the town of Todmorden: a town over

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Phantom Twanger

Six years ago, my husband and I moved to a brand new, three-storey townhouse in north Manchester. We were very happy with the location, a stone's throw from a large park with the only slight drawback being that the bedrooms at the back of the house enjoyed a partial view of the local funeral home. We consoled ourselves that these would be quiet neighbours as the home was respectable having been established many years earlier, and was located in a neat little building with well-kept gardens.

Some eight months after moving in a particularly strange but also somewhat banal event took place. Our bedroom is on the top floor of the house, with a door that leads to a small dressing area which you walk through to access the en-suite bathroom. One night while I was sleeping but my husband was still awake, he heard an extremely loud twanging noise; a second twanging noise woke me up. We both said, "What the hell was that?" We discussed the noise and were both clear that it had come from within the house, appearing to emanate from the dressing area, the door being open at the time. We decided to investigate further in the morning.

On checking the dressing area the next day, the spiral screw-in doorstop had been unscrewed from the wall and was propped against the wall. I screwed it back into the wall and bent it back and let it go "twang!" This was the sound we had heard the night before. We spent the next few days trying to work out a rational explanation but could not find one – we had no pets at the time, there was no one else in the house and as it would have taken considerable effort to create such a loud twanging noise we ruled out house settling etc. My main concern was that if this was evidence of some sort of afterlife then I prayed I wouldn't spend it hanging around people's homes twanging their door stops!

"Whatever it was telescoped into a dark line and zipped out of sight down the stairs"

What happened a week later added a somewhat spooky edge to things. I was sitting on the bed in the same bedroom concentrating on putting on some socks when I became conscious of a figure in the corner of my eye standing on the landing that led into our bedroom. I knew that it was a male figure (I don't know how) and naturally assumed it was my husband as he was the only male in the house. As soon as I looked up, whatever it was telescoped into what I can only describe as a dark line and zipped out of sight down the stairs.

Nearly five years on the house has remained quiet with just one further spooky event. My husband, my mum and I witnessed the vertical blinds in our lounge bulge out at the bottom as if someone had slipped behind them and crouched down. The windows were closed with no draughts in the house and it was the peculiarity of the way the blinds moved that we found so disconcerting.

I've always had the sense that whatever caused each of these strange events was passing through. I often wonder if the odd customer from the local funeral home has a bit of a wander in the neighbourhood before hopefully (!) passing on to a more interesting plane.

Vicky Holt
Prestwich, Manchester

Wriggling sigil

A couple of years ago I watched a YouTube video where the comics writer Grant Morrison was talking onstage about his experiences with sigil magic. I didn't have any previous special interest in this sort of thing (other than a general appreciation for spookiness) and I had not previously been aware of Grant Morrison – the video was just something recommended by YouTube's algorithm.

I cannot remember the precise words he used (and I am disinclined to rewatch the video), but he urged the crowd to try making their own magical sigil. He insisted that you didn't need any special experience or knowledge, you just needed to make a drawn symbol on a piece of paper and consciously invest it with your intention and desire. I may be misquoting him, but that was the essence of it. It was clear that he believed wholeheartedly in the power of this magic. I decided idly to give it a go.

It was mid-afternoon on a bright December day and the rest of the family were at work or school. Some things of possible relevance: I am a professional illustrator and a lapsed Catholic, so I draw constantly and biblical imagery is quite deeply ingrained in me. I also have a very hot and cold relationship with Christianity, having been a fierce atheist as a teenager and an occasional but uncommitted Anglican in the years since. I took a piece of paper and a pen and concentrated on the task.

I decided, for want of anything more specific, that I wanted this sigil to enable me to understand more about the nature of life and existence. As I drew I tried to make the sigil abstract and simple and a little bit geometric. I was probably thinking a little of those old mediæval alchemical symbols. Whatever I was thinking, I wasn't giving the task any serious thought. I was essentially procrastinating – this was little more to me than a form of directed doodling.

I drew a rectangle with two vertical lines rising from its top edge. From the right edge was a wavy line and inside the rectangle was a circle, attached to the rectangle by a small connecting line. As soon as I had drawn it I had the overwhelming feeling of being watched very closely and intelligently (and there is an echo of that feeling as I type this). The symbol I had drawn began to 'wriggle' a little on the page and I suddenly became entirely certain that I had drawn an image of Adam and Eve. The rectangle was the Garden of Eden; the vertical lines were Adam and Eve; the circle was the apple and the wavy line was the snake. As soon as I understood this, the wavy line began very clearly to coil and move on the page. I instantly crumpled the paper, put it in the bin, and took the binbag outside. I was very badly frightened and I burst into tears.

After a few moments the sense of being watched was gone, and things seemed to be normal again. The whole process had probably not taken more than a minute. I had the sensation then that I had received a very clear warning from an intelligence that was lightly mocking me. I felt that I had stumbled carelessly into dangerous territory, and this intelligence had created an experience for me which would have powerful personal resonance and which would stop me from experimenting further. It worked!

I do not have the sigil - long buried in some landfill (I did not even put it in the recycling!)– and I will not recreate it. I have not watched that video again either. I have confirmed for myself beyond doubt that magic is not for me!

JM (name on file)
By email

LETTERS

30 miles away from where he was last seen and with which he had no known connection? Where had he been in the five days since he went missing? Why did he have only one days' growth of stubble? What caused the strange burn marks on his head and neck? And what was the green substance applied to his injuries, presumed to be a form of ointment, that forensic scientists failed to identify?

When the forensic laboratory in Wetherby, West Yorkshire, analysed the substance and could not identify it, two quotes that described the presumed ointment concluded that it was: "Not of this Earth" and "No substance known to Man". Both were made by former PC Malcolm Agley in programmes about UFOs.

Concluding that the substance remained unidentified was intriguing, but I needed to be sure what 'unidentified' actually meant, and what method of testing had been employed. Since the forensic laboratory closed down in 2012, I sent a Freedom of Information request to the Home Office, who then advised me to redirect it to Forensic Archive Limited. They replied: "We have made a search for the information requested and have found a relevant microfiche file from the Home Office Forensic Science Laboratory, Wetherby, which states that Mr Adamski's skin was tested for a wide range of toxic and corrosive substances with negative results.

"We do not hold any items sent to the laboratory related to the case and have no information on their whereabouts, but it is likely that any small toxicological samples from 1980 have been destroyed by now.

"FAL is the custodian of the material within its archive, the majority of which is held on behalf of the relevant police forces. We are therefore unable to release a copy of the microfiche file to you without you first getting permission from West Yorkshire Police.

"However, we have reported all the findings within the file to you.'

I made various enquiries to forensic science organisations and was advised to search online for toxicologists. Three such scientists were kind enough to answer my questions about the testing of unknown substances, and attempts to identify them.

One of them told me: "You first have to make an intelligent guess as to what the unknown substance might be, because different classes of substance would need to be analysed in different ways. If you suspect an opioid, you carry out an analysis against a battery of different opioids, etc. Another variable is the form in which the unknown substance is made available to the lab. It could be present in a sample of body fluid (saliva, blood, urine, etc); it could be present in a tissue biopsy sample; it could be present in a hair sample; or in a sample of foreign matter scraped from the skin, etc.

"These would all need to be prepared for analysis in different ways. Pure compounds are much easier to analyse than mixtures. Nowadays, it is quite easy to analyse mixtures by the application of improved analytical chromatographic techniques and sophisticated computing techniques. Analytical techniques available in 1980 were very much less sophisticated than they are now.'

'When I was trying to identify an unknown substance in the late 1970s, I needed about 25mg of the pure substance for a nuclear magnetic resonance study, and about 1mg for mass spectroscopy. And it could take days or weeks to extract that one substance from a biological sample.'

"But even if the substance was 'chromatographically pure', it could still be a mixture of substances that the particular chromatographic method used was not capable of separating. So, you'd try a different chromatographic separation method… and quite quickly find you'd run out of material to work with.

"The more you have to work with, the easier the job becomes. A 30g tube of ointment would have been very much easier to work with than a scraping of ointment from the skin."

Serving police officer 'Don' (who prefers to remain anonymous and who first featured in my letter 'Alex Cleghorn's Fate', **FT459:66**), told me: "On the toxicology report, I must stress that this isn't an area of expertise for me and any comment I have would only be speculation which isn't especially helpful. What I would say is that any type of testing would have to be targeted against a known substance. For example, a test for cannabis in the body would only show 'positive' if a specific test for cannabis was conducted and wouldn't show (for example) cocaine.

"So, my interpretation for the substance (ointment/gel) being unknown doesn't necessarily mean an unknown substance; just 'unknown' based on a limited number of targeted tests conducted."

Don said he would consult two of his forensic science colleagues on the issue and later said: "I have a response from two Crime Scene Investigators (one a senior CSI), whom I asked independently. I gave them the brief circumstances of the Zigmund Adamski case, so as not to influence their thought processes: only that it was a cold case murder, and it was in 1980.

"I asked what explanation they would propose if an ointment was found on (or near) injuries of a deceased person that was unidentified, despite scientific testing. Interestingly, their responses were very similar.'

"They confirmed that a substance would be tested against known substances that would be reasonably expected to be present. Depending on the curiosity of the Senior Investigating Officer, wider tests may be conducted but this would involve cost and time.

"Both were really confident that given extended time and money, the substance (or compound) could have been identified. They make the fair point that this was 40 years ago, so the capacity for testing would have been far more basic and time-consuming than today.

"Once they had told me this, I provided them with the full details of the case. They were fascinated and each made some additional points.

"One said: 'Well, perhaps it's alien then!'

"The other countered this with: 'It still wouldn't be unknown. Atoms are the same, and form in the same way across the universe; we know this from the study of things that have travelled across the universe and landed here.'"

Don concludes: "They were (both) of the view that the substance was unidentified against the tests conducted, rather than unknown to science."

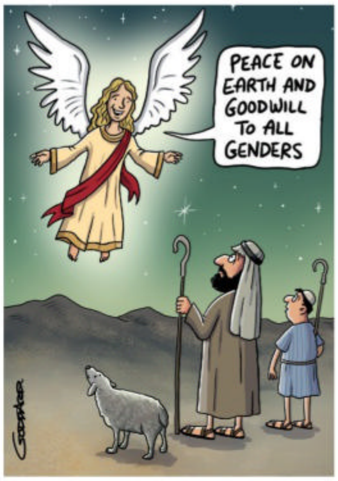
Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Drover's Inn

I was walking the West Highland Way with my brothers a few years ago. One of the stays was at the Drovers Inn, known to be a place that is haunted. The hotel staff asked who wanted the haunted room, and being brave I took that one. After a meal and a few drinks we went to bed. I put my headphones in and fell asleep. Although prior to this I did ask the ghosts not to disturb me.

When I woke up the next day, my phone had broken, the screen was pixelated, nothing would work. There was nothing that I could see could have caused this. So, anyone staying at the Drovers Inn, don't tell the ghosts to give you a peaceful night

Alun Curliss *by email*

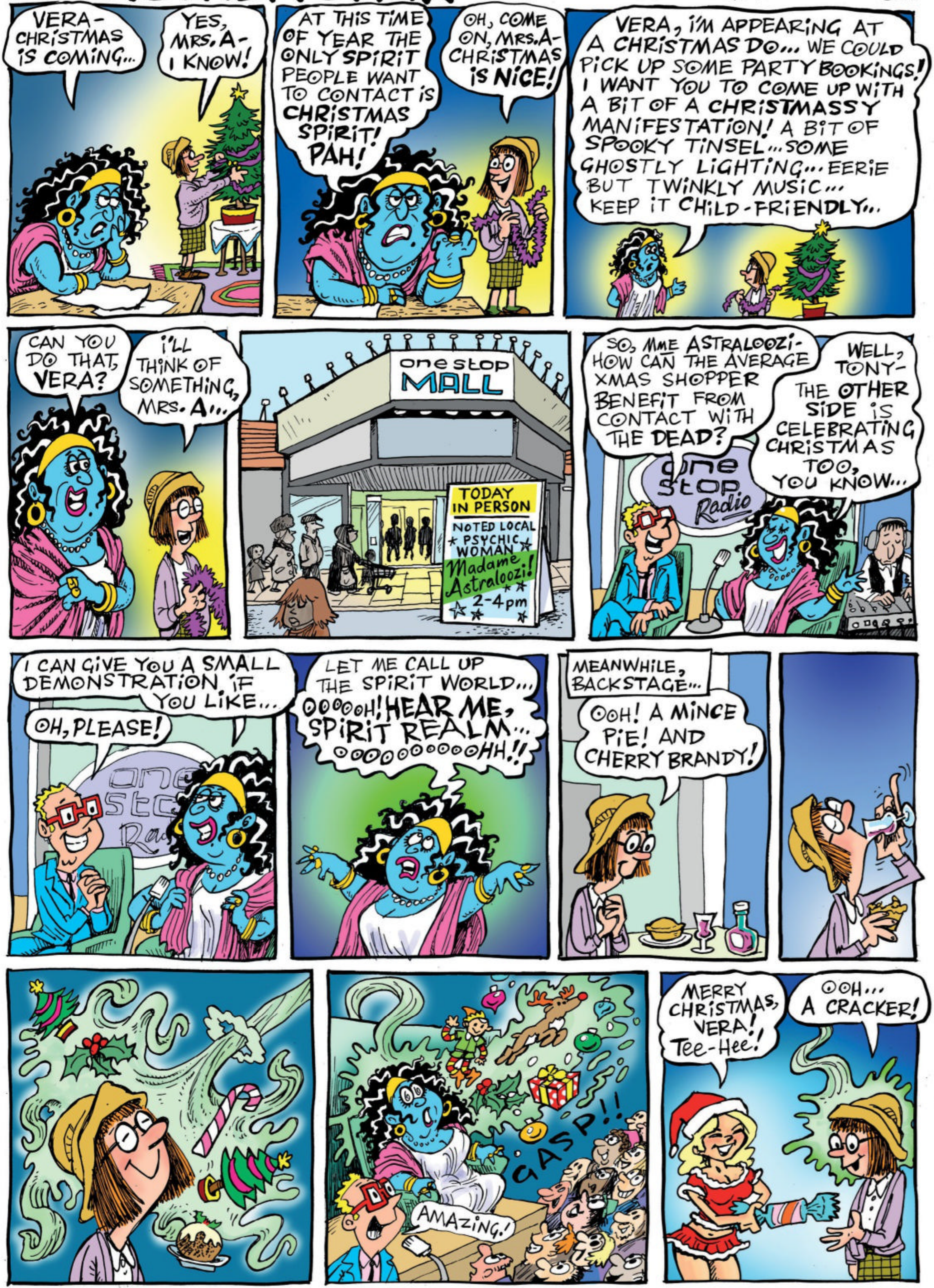

PEACE ON EARTH AND GOODWILL TO ALL GENDERS
Goddard

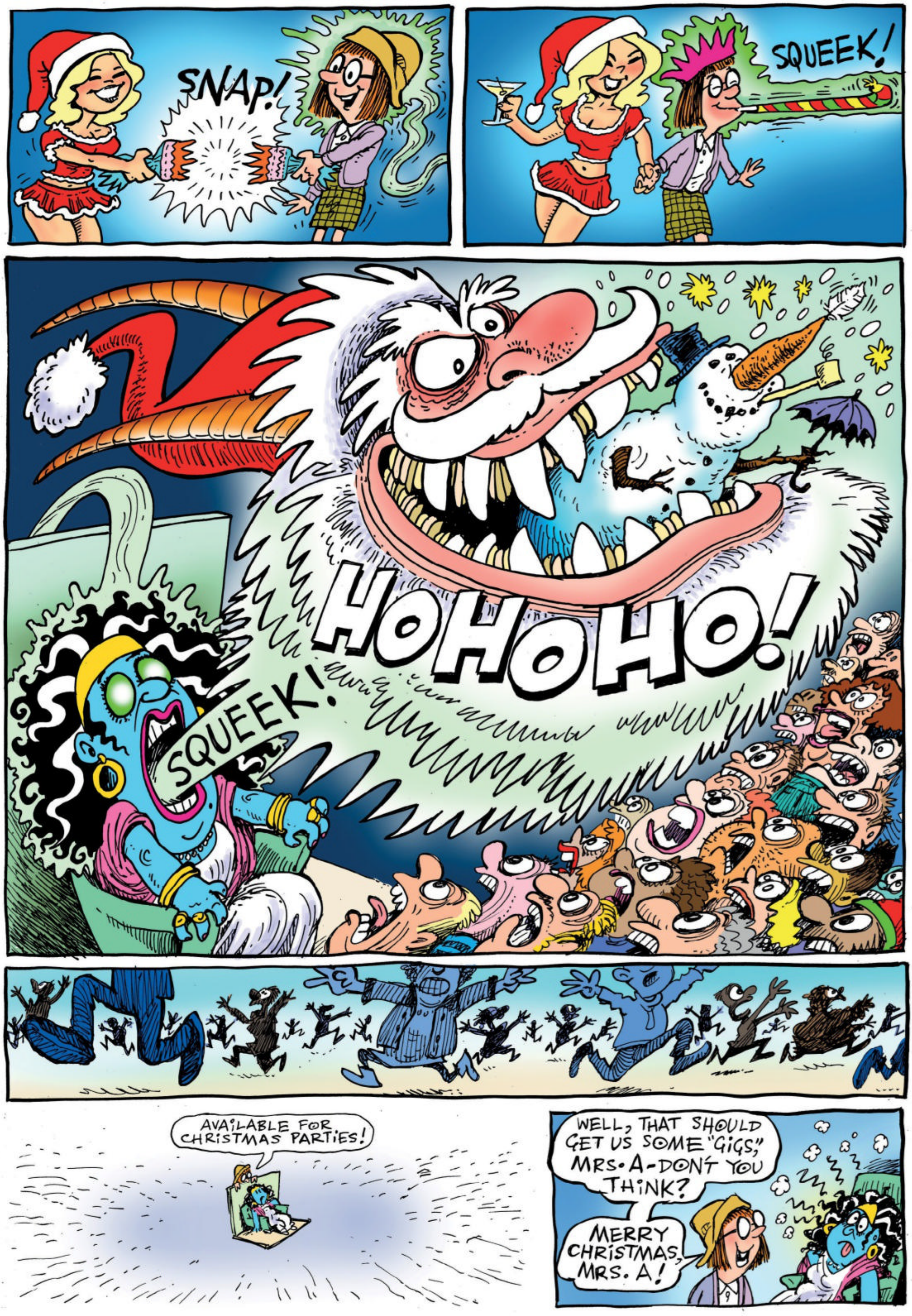
CLIVE GODDARD

PHENOMENOMIX

Mme A's CHRISTMAS

HUNT EMERSON


VERA - CHRISTMAS IS COMING...
YES, MRS. A - I KNOW!
AT THIS TIME OF YEAR THE ONLY SPIRIT PEOPLE WANT TO CONTACT IS CHRISTMAS SPIRIT! PAH!
OH, COME ON, MRS. A - CHRISTMAS IS NICE!
VERA, I'M APPEARING AT A CHRISTMAS DO... WE COULD PICK UP SOME PARTY BOOKINGS! I WANT YOU TO COME UP WITH A BIT OF A CHRISTMASSY MANIFESTATION! A BIT OF SPOOKY TINSEL... SOME GHOSTLY LIGHTING... EERIE BUT TWINKLY MUSIC... KEEP IT CHILD-FRIENDLY...
CAN YOU DO THAT, VERA?
I'LL THINK OF SOMETHING, MRS. A...
one stop MALL
TODAY IN PERSON
NOTED LOCAL PSYCHIC WOMAN
Madame Astraloozi!
2-4pm
SO, MME ASTRALOOZI - HOW CAN THE AVERAGE XMAS SHOPPER BENEFIT FROM CONTACT WITH THE DEAD?
WELL, TONY - THE OTHER SIDE IS CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS TOO, YOU KNOW...
one stop Radio
I CAN GIVE YOU A SMALL DEMONSTRATION, IF YOU LIKE...
OH, PLEASE!
LET ME CALL UP THE SPIRIT WORLD...
OOOOOH! HEAR ME, SPIRIT REALM... OOOOOOOOOOOHH!!
MEANWHILE, BACKSTAGE...
OOH! A MINCE PIE! AND CHERRY BRANDY!
GASP!!
AMAZING!
MERRY CHRISTMAS, VERA! Tee-Hee!
OOH... A CRACKER!


SNAP!
SQUEEK!
HOHOHO!
SQUEEEK!
AVAILABLE FOR CHRISTMAS PARTIES!
WELL, THAT SHOULD GET US SOME "GIGS," MRS. A - DON'T YOU THINK?
MERRY CHRISTMAS, MRS. A!

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HAUNTED SCREENS

THE OCCULT ORIGINS OF TELEVISION

Efraim Martinin torpan paikka

MARTIN'S DEVILS

THE STORY OF THE YLÖJÄRVI POLTERGEIST

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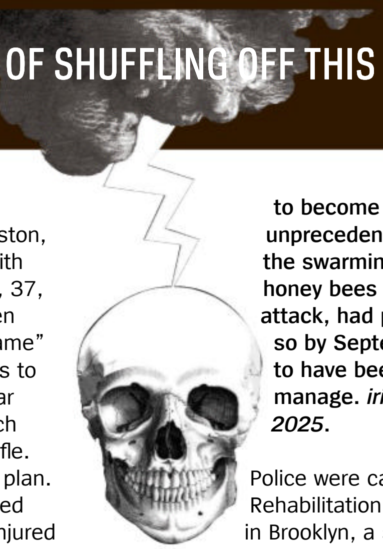
ON SALE 24 DEC 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Aaron Prout, 34, a former Royal Marine living in Houston, Texas, was hanging out with his friend Sean O'Donnell, 37, a US military veteran, when they decided to play a "game" which involved taking turns to wear a military-grade Kevlar helmet, then shooting each other in the head with a rifle. However, all did not go to plan. O'Donnell's shot penetrated the helmet and severely injured Prout, who was rushed to hospital where he later died of his injuries. In a statement after Prout's death a relative said, "Aaron was a very caring and wonderful person... His passion was target shooting, and he had won many tournaments." Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, though, said, "It's hard to believe two so-called friends would take turns shooting at each other wearing a Kevlar helmet, inside a house in a residential neighbourhood, while using a rifle." Kevlar has a reputation for being bulletproof, but at the thickness of a helmet it only provides protection against shrapnel and handgun bullets, and while it offers some resistance to rifle fire, it is not guaranteed to stop it.

Also in Texas, Jose Magareno, 21, ended up accused of murder after the death of his cousin. On a visit to Magareno's house in Dallas to celebrate his birthday, 19-year-old Emmanuel Najera and his younger brother got into a conversation with him about guns and concealed carry, during which Magareno gave Najera a gun, saying he wanted to "test his reaction time". Magareno then pulled his own gun on him and squeezed the trigger, firing a bullet which struck Najera in the chest and killed him. Arrested for murder, Magareno explained that he often practised with his gun and believed he had taken out all the bullets before pulling the trigger and had not intended to kill his cousin. *metro.co.uk, 31 Aug; lawandcrime.com, 3 Sept 2025.*

Beekeeper and retired nurse Kathleen Devine, 73, died from multiple stings after being suddenly attacked by bees while she was tending one of her hives near Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland. Helen Mooney of the Mayo Beekeepers Association said, "This tragedy has shocked the entire beekeeping community across Ireland", explaining that honey bees in a hive are not usually aggressive, "so for a colony to become this defensive is unprecedented." She noted that the swarming season, when honey bees are more likely to attack, had passed in mid-July, so by September they ought to have been calm and easy to manage. *irishtimes.com, 3 Sept 2025*.

Police were called to the Seagate Rehabilitation and Nursing Center in Brooklyn, a seniors' care home, after an altercation between two residents that resulted in the death of Nina Kravtsov, 89. It is unclear why the argument broke out between Kravtsov and an unnamed 95-year-old woman, but during the heated disagreement, the 95-year-old, who has dementia, beat Kravtsov around the head repeatedly with a metal wheelchair part, seriously injuring her. Kravtsov was rushed to Lutheran Hospital, but later died of her injuries. The suspect was taken to a different hospital for observation, but is unlikely to be charged due to her cognitive condition, which means she remembers nothing about the assault.

In Benidorm, Spain, a row between two British women in their 60s holidaying in the town's Rincón de Loix, area, known as "Little England", resulted in a third woman in their apartment calling the police. When they arrived, they found a 66-year-old woman dead, having been strangled with the cord of a vacuum cleaner by her 64-year-old companion, who immediately confessed to the killing. Again, the cause of the fatal conflict remains unknown. *nbcnewyork.com, 16 Sept; mirror.co.uk, 18 Sept 2025.*

Fauja Singh, 114, from Ilford, London, ran his first marathon at 89, and continued to run them until he was past his 100th birthday, having become the first centenarian to run a marathon. He was a torchbearer at the 2012 London Olympics at the age of 101, after which he retired from competitive road races. He attributed his longevity and stamina to a diet of ginger curry and regular meditation. While his continued good health put him in a strong position to one day be the world's oldest man, this was not to be; he was hit by a car and killed while crossing the road in his birth village of Beas Pind in India while on a visit there to see relatives. *news.sky.com, 15 Jul 2025.*

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